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the diocesan community page 3

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After Andrew—helping pick up the pieces

The following story is an account of the aftermath of hurricane Andrew by Randy Pribyl, a member of St. John Vianney parish in Bettendorf. Pribyl, a local stockbroker, traveled to Florida on business after the storm and stayed Sept. 12-15 to assist in the clean-up efforts.

By RANDY PRIBYL

The taxi driver said he didn't want to take me into the hurricane zone. He'd only been there once and he shook for three days at the volume of destruction. Reluctantly, he agreed to go.

It was dusk as we pulled off the tollway in the older cargo-like van he used as a taxi. A group of six residents mistook us for looters and ran towards us shouting. He sped away.

Upon arriving at Christ the King Catholic Church, located a few miles north of Homestead, Florida, I stepped off the van with three suitcases. A tent, tools and provisions were packed inside to support me for the next several days as I volunteered to help some families back on their feet.

Members from Habitat for Humanity took me under their wing and helped set up my temporary home. They said three gunshots woke them the previous night but military personnel were quickly on the scene with a helicopter; no one was hurt. It was apparently a drive-by shooting.

The next morning, the home of Paul Levy was our first stop. The Habitat group had already been on the site for a couple days rebuilding

the roof. The roof was ripped off by 180 mph winds, exposing all but two rooms to the sky above.

By day's end, however, the roof was completely rebuilt, except the end of the living room where even the trusses had been blown away. We could only put plastic over that area.

The Levy family was relieved. The daily Florida rains were sealed out for the first time in three weeks; interior clean up could now be finished.

Paul told me he had been looking forward to experiencing a hurricane. He underestimated what was coming. The wind blew out his windows, shredded his roof, shook the house violently, crumpled the ceiling to the floor and retreated his family to the laundry room (the last room where they could keep the fury out by holding the door shut).

The next morning, the new look of his neighborhood drew him on a short journey. He said, "When I saw an 18-wheeler on top of a roof, it hit me. I knew something bad had happened."

Paul said there might be something good from this hurricane. There had been terrific tension about police brutality around here and felt riots similar to Los Angeles were possible.

"This will delay it," he said.

THERE WERE MANY stories like Paul's. One lady said she was in her home with her baby and 22 cats. As the wind was tearing sheets of plywood off her roof, it sucked the ceiling and 18 of her cats right out the roof. It was so hard to hold her

baby, she put her in the oven and held on to the range to save herself and the child.

One man and his family survived in their bathroom. The hurricane blew apart most of his home and during the last half hour of the 90-minute storm, it was all he could do to keep the bathroom door from being sucked away.

Once the winds died, he opened the door. Between the flashes of lightning, it wasn't his hallway he saw but his neighbor's destroyed home and truck loads of debris dripping on his bedroom floors.

The priest's home swayed so much the roof broke and the floor buckled. It has since been condemned and will be bulldozed.

One man who lived in a two-story house said they were the lucky ones; only the second story was gone. Just four miles south, both stories were gone.

For the next two days, we helped an elderly couple in poor health, who had no insurance.

Fortunately, their exterior and interior walls were good and all trusses were in place. We nailed up new plywood and roofing material. Drywall will come for them later, but a roof over their heads gave them a new sense of pride. Their's was the only fully repaired roof in the neighborhood.

He told us he hoped the electricity would be restored soon, since his wife was heating meals with a blow torch. She begged us as we left and said she would pray for us.

"We'll make it," glowed on her face.

GARY, ONE OF THE volunteers, had traveled from Virginia with his motor home loaded with donated supplies. As we rolled out roofing paper, he said that last year he had bought a 15-acre wooded tract to build a secluded home. He had looked very hard to find a site where his



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(See DEVASTATION on Page 4)



The rebuilding of Homestead, Florida after hurricane Andrew came through is just one roof at a time. Local broker, Randy Pribyl, shares his story of helping do just that looking at the devastation from the top down.

Devastation, disappointment are not the same

(Continued from Page 3)

house could be completely shielded from view.

When the power company came in, however, and cut a 50-yard wide path through the trees to bring in electricity, he said, you could easily see right out onto the road. "I felt completely devastated at the time," he said. "I was wrong; this is devastation and that was only disappointment."

I noticed a woman standing at the curb watching us work. She said they were doing OK when I asked. She had put her family in the car inside their garage after the windows in the house had broken and the roof started flying apart. The garage door blew off though, and the car banged against the walls while the shift lever was still in park.

She pointed to some drywall laying by the curb and asked me to look at the wallpaper on it. Four weeks ago she had installed it. I said, "That paper was probably important to you then." She replied, "Wallpaper means nothing."

The priest appreciated the help I was giving and invited me to dinner one night. We drove 20 minutes down the tollway out of the hurricane zone. Along the way he pointed out that the toll booths had been destroyed and we didn't have to pay. He smiled and said, "It's the only good thing I've seen come out of the hurricane."

The restaurant was located in a mall. While walking past the stores to get there, it was like the Star Ship Enterprise had beamed us up to a whole new planet. Designer clothes, gold bracelets and new hairdo's. Apparently it wasn't enough; people were looking for more.

They were into themselves, polished up and thumbing through racks to look more polished up.

No one cared about me and I was sad; it was hard to care about them. Caring and being cared about was easy 20 minutes south. At the volunteer camp, people were dirty and there were no gold jewels or pretty clothes. Yet, the volunteers were much more beautiful. I wanted to go back.

On my last night, I straightened my sleeping bag and slowly rolled over taking time to gently straighten my legs. Even though my legs hurt, I felt surprisingly well considering I wasn't used to manual labor.

I began to relax and wondered what I would remember most of my five days. Lots of thoughts flipped by, but two kept coming back: The volume of destruction and how the victims who were seeking comfort from God were finding it.

The thought occurred that God had spanked them for getting their values mixed up, but then held them while they cried.