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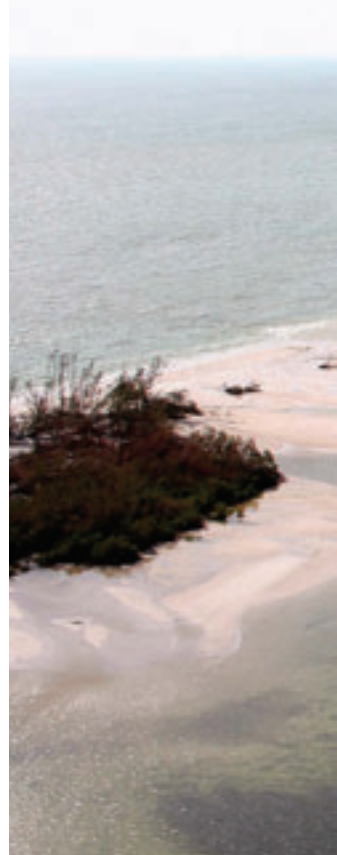
RIDING THE

PHOTO COURTESY OF NOAA, MIAMI



Hurricane Charley approaches Southwest Florida as a category four storm.

PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON



SURVIVING CHARLEY

BY CHELLE KOSTER WALTON

Reports from Main Street, Sanibel, and beyond.

“Where were you when Charley let loose?” It’s a conversation starter that’s certain to release memories, tales, lore, and even a few laughs in years and decades to come.

For some intrepid islanders, the answer is “home.” Estimates of islanders who held tight on Sanibel range from one hundred to two hundred. Among those arguably crazy souls stood my husband, Rob, and a tight, hard-core group of survival-savvy islanders in our neighborhood—Main Street, Sanibel.

Most people don’t even know Sanibel has a Main Street. It’s that old section of the island off of Periwinkle Way, east of Dixie Beach Boulevard. It’s hardly the bustling main street of most towns, yet some thirty people on and around it defied Charley and evacuation notices on August 13. Others were dispersed and clustered elsewhere on the island when 120-plus mph winds hit and howled at them for staying. *Did they regret it?*

STORM OUT



AT 3:45 P.M. FRIDAY, AUGUST 13, HURRICANE CHARLEY MADE LANDFALL ON CAYO COSTA, JUST NORTH OF NORTH CAPTIVA ISLAND, WITH SUSTAINED WINDS OF 145 MILES PER HOUR.



Carol and Larry Strange and grandson Will Strange, age two.

“We were never scared,” says Carol Strange, whose family, owners of Sanibel Seashell Industries, camped at her house one block away from Main Street, on Fitzhugh Street. “We felt very secure in this high house—we had built it to withstand hurricanes—in the middle of the island. We had so many things to consider—dogs, cats, lizards, fish. We had eleven people, three generations, here.

“We have a lot of education in this family, but obviously we’re not too smart,” she adds with a chuckle.

“We had decided to leave the island,” says Strange’s daughter, MaryBeth Greenplate, “but by then we heard they had closed the causeway.”

“My mom and dad are thinking they made a big mistake staying on the island.”

– *From the journal of Kimberly Greenplate, age 12*



Holly Wood rakes debris at Billy's Rentals.

“I wouldn’t say I regretted it,” says Billy Kirkland, owner of Billy’s Rentals. “If I knew it was going to be that bad, I wouldn’t have stayed. I’m not that stupid. But we were very prepared with this tractor, a big generator. We always had AC.”

Preparation was key, according to those who stayed and felt compelled to talk or even write about the experience. Here’s how the Main Street neighborhood got ready, rode out the storm, and survived the hardships in the aftermath. I should mention here that my son and I were gone on assignment to the Caribbean, but we were able to keep in almost continuous phone contact with Rob.

Beginning Wednesday, Rob had fastened storm shutters (our saving grace, he believes), filled his boat with water, run buckets and a bathtub of water, stocked up on dog food and other supplies and turned the refrigerators on high. Charley, nonetheless, caught even the well-prepared off guard.

“Friday the 13th, 1:30 p.m. Threw half of the pool furniture into the pool.”

– *From the journal of Rob Walton*



Toby Clark pitches in to clean up at Tarpon Bay.

“When it went from category two to four, at one point I looked at John and said, ‘We still have a few minutes. We can get over the bridge,’” says Sanibel Title Insurance Service Corp. owner Michelle Chase, who stayed with Johnny’s Pizza owner Johnny Costanzo just off of Main Street on Centre Street. But Costanzo concluded the winds were already too strong. “The eeriest part was late that morning, when all was quiet except for the ‘doot doot’ of the emergency vehicles and the P.A. announcements telling us it was mandatory evacuation,” says Chase. “That sent such chills.”

The homes around Main Street were barely scathed. We hadn’t a scratch on our structure, only trees decimated. Rob, a weather freak (on the crazy end of that scale who stayed), watched from poolside. The Strange clan headed for the house’s elevator when the screen enclosure exploded.

Left: Vince Chiaramonte and George Schnapp grill up hot dogs in front of Coral Veterinary Clinic.



“2:37 p.m. The wind is kicking ass....
The back porch is still a good place
to feel and hear the storm.”

– From the journal of Rob Walton

“We sat in the elevator. We said a prayer.” – Will Strange,
age 2, as dictated to his grandmother.

Across the street, Grady Scott, his family, and some of the neighbors milled around the house, also built to the latest hurricane standards. “We made banana splits,” his five-year-old son, Wyatt, tells me. Ice cream must not go to waste under any circumstance!

“2:40 p.m. It is getting darker now. Wind sounds like a jet taking off. I think the storm just kicked it up a notch. Lots of wind, not much rain.” – From the journal of Rob Walton.

“Every time the wind gusts, it sounds
like the kitchen window is screaming.”

– From the journal of Rob Walton

Rob’s journal reports that by 5:30 p.m. the worst was over, that he poured himself a drink and went out with neighbors to survey the damage. For Costanzo, the highest priority was checking on his son, who was staying in the Iona area, and his parents, who were near Bowman’s Beach. The last he had heard from them, their roof had just blown off, then the cell-phone connection went dead. “I had this terrible feeling, and I couldn’t get ahold of them.”



PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN BLASE

Johnny Costanzo takes a break from working in the post-storm heat.



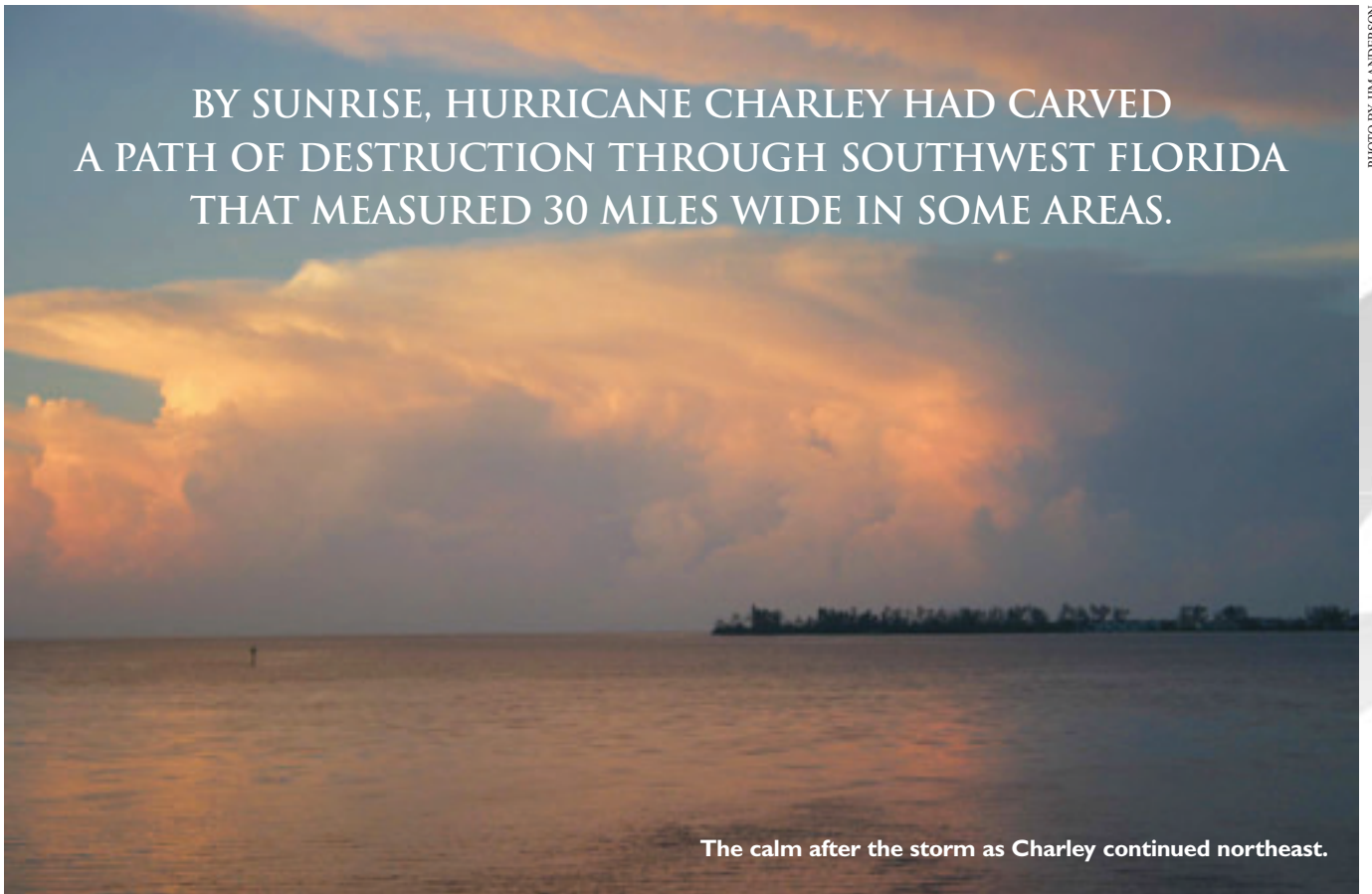
Countless downed trees and huge limbs blocked roads and punched through roofs.



At Seahorse Cottages, a shell-cleaning bench was uprooted with the large ficus tree that had shaded it.

BY SUNRISE, HURRICANE CHARLEY HAD CARVED
A PATH OF DESTRUCTION THROUGH SOUTHWEST FLORIDA
THAT MEASURED 30 MILES WIDE IN SOME AREAS.

PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON



The calm after the storm as Charley continued northeast.

When I, frantic upon hearing the storm had changed its itinerary, spoke to Rob that afternoon, his mood was exuberant. Could have had something to do with that drink, but I read in it more of an energy from the storm and sheer relief to be alive and well. The next morning, the mood had changed. “I’m feeling melancholy today,” he said, facing the clean-up efforts and the destruction of the island he has loved and called home for more than twenty-five years.

The mood had changed that day at Johnny Costanzo’s house, too, but joy replaced anxiety when he discovered his family had survived. “Life was good after I got in touch with everybody. That was a tense day. I put my bike in the car and took off. When I saw my father, it was this huge relief.”

“Water is the importantest.”

– From the journal of Taylor Strange, age 9.

“9:05 p.m. I like camping with indoor bathrooms. H₂O is good, phone is good. Cable bad, electric bad.” – From the journal of Rob Walton.

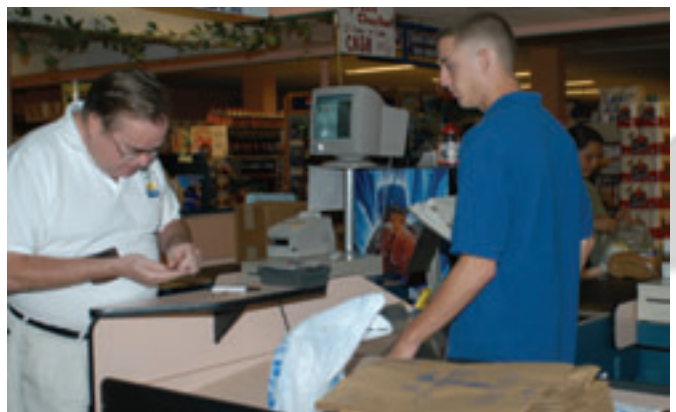
Camping out lost its glamour in days to come, especially once the water and phone service died.

Main Streeters spent their early mornings cleaning up, then repairing to the Walton pool for relief. In the evenings they got together to grill refrigerated foods and share. The sounds of generators charged the air. Rob ran an extension cord off of the Scotts’ so he could operate a fan, trading Grady for our other fan and gas. Rob, owner of Grounds By Greenways landscaping, put his equipment to work on local clean-up efforts.



At Jensen’s Twin Palm Cottages on Captiva, Jimmy Jensen stacks logs from downed trees.

PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE



Scott Liebal and other staff kept Bailey’s General Store open without electricity to serve customers, including Roger Burns.

PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE

Billy Kirkland had his tractor out clearing Periwinkle Way. He opened his house to city employees and neighbors with food and the luxury of air-conditioning. Bailey's General Store, which had sheltered co-owner Sam Bailey and store employees, opened without electricity. Customers wrote down the prices of their purchases for cashiers to ring up.

From the Strange household, the families of MaryBeth Greenplate and her brother returned home, where damage was more severe. The grandkids often came together at the Fitzhugh home to swim. Grandma Carol had them write down their feelings about the storm for posterity. Every morning, she took them to the beach, where they found nary another soul. What they did find proved a pinnacle in Carol's long shelling career: two junonias in the space of ten minutes, the first she'd ever found.

There were other moments after the brunt of destruction that islanders who stayed will always cherish. For many, it was the peace of the island—despite the often maddening whir of generators—and the quiet. "It was a ghost town," says Carol Strange.

A certain possessiveness overtook the survivors. When I talked to islander Allen Ravenscraft after my return to Ft. Myers, he was dreading the return of islanders, which he feared would impede the quick progress being made. Others felt the same. They held together with the glue of interdependency, know-how, and good humor.

"You should always turn problems into opportunities."

— From the journal of Carol Strange, paraphrasing mentor, preacher, and author Dr. Ernst G. Schmidt.

"You have to have a sense of humor about it," says MaryBeth Greenplate, who jokes about her unintentional loss of five pounds on the "Charley diet." "What else can you do? There're a lot worse off."

When I came home on Wednesday morning, I was greeted by the plywood sign her children, nieces, and nephews had painted and placed on Causeway Road: "Welcome Home. We Missed You," it read, signed by all the kids. I found the survivors in good spirits, thankful for the quick work the city made of clearing roads, for the angels who delivered ice and water every day, for the surge that never came, to the National Guard, the Red Cross, and all the help. Even for the opportunity to connect with family and friends in a purely unique circumstance.

That's how the islanders who rode out Charley survived. They recognize that hurricane-confronting isn't for everyone and that many stayed because no shelter accommodations are made for pets.

Billy Kirkland says many who stayed weren't properly prepared. No one recommends that. Only the prepared, generator-equipped, and survivor-hardy need apply. Others would be voted off the island. 🐉

Chelle Koster Walton is a travel writer who has lived on Sanibel since 1981. She has authored and co-authored many travel guides, and her work has appeared in numerous national and regional magazines.

Right: Corny Becker helps clean up the mess at Seahorse Cottages.



Billy Kirkland, owner of Billy's Rentals, mounted his tractor and helped clear Periwinkle Way.



Patricia Clark, Toby Burch, and Alice Harjung clean up the shop at Tarpon Bay Explorers.



At Jerry's, Jack David speaks with store employee Mark Pucker. The mood was all business on the day after Sanibel reopened to residents.

