

## Inside Punta Gorda

The story of what took place at Life Care Center of Punta Gorda when Hurricane Charley roared in off the Gulf of Mexico is one of exceptional courage and commitment by the associates there. One of the folks who had the best perspective on what transpired in that place on that fateful Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> and afterward is Dee McCarthy, regional director of clinical services for the Citrus and Sun States regions. Here is her account. It is a much longer commentary than customarily appears in this space, but it is one of great interest.

Although Hurricane Charley has devastated most of Punta Gorda and wreaked havoc with a lot of our lives and our building, he did not devastate us; our spirit of “Whatever It Takes,” or our commitment to our residents. The fine staff of Life Care Center of Punta Gorda has proven this. You are all my heroes.

On Friday, August 13, Hurricane Charley “wobbled” off his predicted path and slammed into the quiet coastal town of Punta Gorda with 145-mile-per-hour winds. With the administrator on vacation, Jo C. Wohlforth, director of clinical services, and her team met this threat head-on. Second-floor residents were evacuated down the stairwells as upstairs windows were blown in, ceiling tiles came crashing down and traffic signs sailed into residents’ rooms. Michael Kirsch, regional vice president, and facility associates brought some residents down on mattresses, some cradled in their arms and some down one step at a time. This in itself was a formidable task as the secured Alzheimer’s unit was on the second floor. In the process of preventing a resident from falling down the stairs, Maggie (the MDS coordinator) severely fractured one wrist and sprained the other. And yet, all residents were moved without injury.

With no electricity, a failing generator and leaking ceilings, the staff set about settling in the residents. Food, medications and comfort were dispensed with such cheer and devotion to duty that you would never guess that most of the associates did not know if their own families and homes had survived the storm. The mantra, “We’re camping out tonight. Isn’t this fun?,” could be heard through the main hall and dining room as displaced residents were helped to mattresses on the floor and tucked in for the night.

By Saturday, many associates had not been home in 48 hours. The business office team manned the phones and entrance all night. Housekeeping and Maintenance, now days without sleep, worked ceaselessly to clear areas and distribute supplies. The dietary staff not only fed everyone, but helped pack, transport, clean, etc. Nurses and CNAs, some still not aware of the disposition of their homes and families, continued to care for the residents. Phone lines were failing and the generator quit.

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Admissions Director Kathy Tripp, despite knowing she had lost everything she owned, assisted with reassuring family members who were able to get through on jammed and failing phone lines. At this time, we're not sure how many staff members lost their homes or worse. Due to downed phone lines and cell towers, communication continues to be very difficult. I have a preliminary number of 13 (funny how that number keeps coming up), but this is unsubstantiated.

Forrest Preston sent contractors to assess the damage and "shore up the building." Associates' husbands cleared debris from the parking lot and roadway to allow the evacuation buses, vans, and ambulances passage to the building. They braved the streets to notify the police of the expected buses and then pitched in as loaders and transporters. Former employees arrived with chainsaws to clear fallen trees. Our young friend, Steven, toted boxes, drinks and snacks. More importantly, he kept all the flashlights supplied with batteries.

Within the building it was pitch black. By the flicker of flashlights, the staff worked feverishly to prepare for evacuation. Thom, marketing director, made sure all disaster tags were filled out and correct. Nurses packaged medications. CNAs readied residents. Activity Director Shelly and Housekeeping Supervisor Susie packed belongings, located linens, pads and supplies. Wanda and Pat, unit managers, set up transport teams. Social workers Chris and Tom worked tirelessly to make sure all residents were tagged for transport and in the right line.

Behind the scenes, other members of our Life Care family ensured we had what we needed to evacuate the building. Buses, vans and ambulances arrived as if by magic. In reality, many people had worked all night to make that magic possible -- Brian Cook, Karin DiPiero, Jim Breuler, Amy Lefco, to name a few. There are many more names we'll probably never know.

Life Care Centers of Sarasota, Estero, Darcy Hall, Port St. Lucie, Gardens Court, New Port Richey and Winter Haven sent their vans and staff to assist with the evacuation. Along with these facilities, Life Care Centers of Inverrary and Lakeside accepted our displaced residents. Then began the arduous job of loading the various transports.

Working in 90-degree heat with 90 percent humidity, Punta Gorda's sleep-starved staff labored to load their 160 residents and transport them to the receiving facilities. Nealia Bryant, rehab director and newest member of the Punta Gorda team, worked nonstop. Her knowledge of how each resident transferred was invaluable. Jerrold, restorative aide, lent his muscles in getting residents up and in the large buses. A special note must be made of Clayton, OT from Sarasota. We could not have loaded many of the residents without him. Heather, the physician's assistant from Estero, accompanied the hospice residents to Estero to ensure they remained as comfortable as possible. When the residents were loaded, Punta Gorda's nurses and CNAs boarded the buses and accompanied them to the receiving facilities. All 160 residents arrived without injury or incident.

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The First Assembly of God of Estero brought pickup trucks, vans and a school bus. They moved equipment and supplies for us to Estero. Likewise, there are many, many nameless others who need to be recognized for hauling wheelchairs, belongings, staff, etc. to all the receiving facilities. I am indebted to the executive directors and directors of clinical services of the nine receiving facilities. The facilities made sure the residents were warmly welcomed, fed and medicated. In addition, they continued the process of notifying all the family members. These EDs and DONs had a long night.

As you can see, there are countless people who are owed so much praise and thanks. There is just no way to remember everyone's name. Suffice it to say, you have my heartfelt gratitude and my admiration for all you have done. From talking with the families, I can tell you that your care for our residents is valued beyond any words I could say here. "Whatever it Takes" is more than a slogan to you. You have all exemplified its true meaning these last few days. I can not begin to tell you what it means to me to have the honor of working with each one of you.

I would like to recognize Jo C. Wohlforth for her quiet strength in the face of adversity and uncertainty. With steadfast calm and gentle humor, she supported and directed her staff enabling them to accomplish their goal. She truly "held down the fort" and triumphed in the end. It is a privilege to know her and count her a friend.

Thank all of you for your prayers and words of encouragement for the staff and residents of Punta Gorda. Thank you all for everything you have done and do for our residents.. As my Irish grandmother would say, "May the good Lord hold you and keep you as close to His heart as I do to mine."

And that concludes Dee McCarthy's account. What a wonderful chronicling of events, and an insightful look into what transpired in Life Care Center of Punta Gorda, she provided. And it is a beautiful story of love and sacrifice of people we call associates. But you can also call them angels of God's love and grace.

--Beecher Hunter