

HURRICANE ANDREW

AFTER THE STORM

TEN YEARS LATER

MIGRANT WORKERS

Permanent housing one of few blessings

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In a way, Andrew did South Florida's migrant workers a favor.

Ten years ago, hundreds of migrants who harvested Homestead's winter vegetables lived in dilapidated trailers at the Everglades Labor Camp near Naranja. The camp was set up in 1974 with 400 mobile homes provided by the U.S. Labor Department. By 1992, the camp was notorious for its crime and squalor. The mobile homes were falling apart. "They were unconscionable," said Steven Kirk, executive director of the Everglades Community Association.

Then along came Andrew and blew the place to bits. "What we had down there was a ghetto!" then-Gov. Lawton Chiles said afterward. "But the good Lord helped us get rid of those. Now we're going to build it better." At the time that sounded like a politician's promise, easily made and easily broken. But it wasn't.

Kirk's nonprofit association has spent the past 10 years using more than \$40-million in local, state and federal grants and loans to build permanent houses for the migrants, creating a community called Everglades Villages. So far they have built 448 homes. Thirteen families are living temporarily in mobile homes in Naranja until their houses are finished, Kirk said. The work should be done by next spring, Kirk said. Then, the mobile home complex used for temporary housing will be converted to a park.

Besides the homes, Everglades Villages features child care centers, a health care facility and even a soccer field. As a result, migrants who 10 years ago stayed in South Florida only during the harvest season are now putting down roots. They are finding construction jobs and other seasonal employment so they can stay year-round. "Today we probably have the finest farmworker housing in the U.S.," Kirk said. "It's one of the few blessings that came out of the storm."

- CRAIG PITTMAN and JACK ROWLAND