

# Miami Herald

## DONOR AIDS VICTIMS OF THE STORM

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After Hurricane Wilma hit last fall, Marlene Brody repaired her storm-damaged seawall and returned to life as a snowbird, shuttling between her upstate New York horse farm and winter home in North Bay Village. But then Brody heard a radio news report that made her realize recovery had not been as easy for everyone. The dispatch told of hundreds of Florida farmworkers still scrambling to find work in the wake of widespread crop damage. Many were scraping by on part-time jobs in half-shuttered nurseries and desolate fields. And so Brody, 74, decided to help out, donating nearly \$60,000 in Publix food coupons and back-rent payments to migrant workers at Everglades Village in Florida City.

"I heard that a lot of people had sort of cashed out and given it all to [Hurricane Katrina victims in] New Orleans, and that Wilma victims weren't getting anything," said Brody, whose late husband owned the Manhattan steak house, Gallagher's. Snowbirds, she said, need to give back to their adopted hometowns. "You can't just take, take - you have to give, give," she said.

On Feb. 23, she joined Rotary Club members at Everglades Village, a migrant worker community, with a stack of 400 \$100 Publix gift cards in hand. She made the donation through the Rotary's South Florida district, where a Key Biscayne member and friend, Ruben Weisson, had directed her. Village residents dropped by to pick up their cards.

"It has been a little difficult, because everything was destroyed and a lot of companies closed" after Hurricane Wilma, said Antonio Ortiz, 28, whose wife Brigida Cervantes collected the couple's Publix card with a smile. The pair - who have found new nursery jobs raising palms and small plants after Wilma shut down their former employers' stock - used the card to load up on bread, soup, rice and butter, toilet paper and shampoo. "It's really good, it's a help," Ortiz said.

But without steady, full-time work, hundreds of migrant workers are still struggling to get by in South Miami-Dade. "Economic disruptions like Hurricane Wilma or Katrina - both of which disrupted our agricultural community considerably - have a real economic impact on people who depend on agriculture for a living," said Steven Kirk, executive director of the nonprofit Everglades Community Association, which runs Everglades Village at 19308 SW 380th St. "Our entire county lost power, but everyone else was able to go back to their jobs a week later. Here people are still, in a sense, sharing what work remains," he said.

Typically there is a post-storm boom in clean-up work, Kirk said, but once that dries up, workers face empty fields, a delayed planting season and far fewer farm jobs. These days, two workers are likely to share work - and pay - that was intended for one, he said. "If any of us lost 25 percent or a third of our incomes, the recovery we'd have to make as a family would take a year, maybe more," he said. "But if your average income is \$14,000, and your work is disrupted," it's much harder to get by, he said.

Everglades Village, founded in 1982 to provide affordable housing to migrant farmworkers, was once a collection of 400 mobile homes. Leveled by Hurricane Andrew in 1992, the community eventually swelled to more than 900 trailers. The Everglades Community Association has replaced those trailers with 448 suburban-looking homes and established a gated community complete with child care centers, a health clinic and 10-acre park. The only requirements for its 2,000-plus residents, most of whom are from Mexico and Guatemala: They must work in agriculture and make less than \$35,800 a year. Average incomes are far less. A typical family of four there earns about \$14,000, Kirk said - leaving residents more vulnerable to the impact of destructive storms. For now at least, Brody's gift - the largest ever from an individual to the association, Kirk said - provides some relief: \$40,000 in Publix food cards and \$18,000 in rent aid.

Recipients thanked Brody with hugs and chatter in Spanish - which she picked up decades ago in Spain - and baskets of tomatoes, squash, zucchini and beans. ``To find an angel who sort of steps out in the midst of these storms is a real blessing," Kirk said. ``It's nice to see that the people who live downtown still think so generously of the people who live in South Dade."