

RISING FROM RUBBLE

In 1992, Hurricane Andrew nearly wiped Homestead, Fla., off the map. But after some early stumbles and a lot of help from private enterprise the town is stronger than ever.

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HOMESTEAD, FLA. -- One weekend every November, more than 100,000 stock-car fans pack the long, high bleachers that rise like a battleship above this town on the verge of the Everglades. Many in attendance think the hugely popular NASCAR circuit built the Homestead-Miami Speedway. But it was really Hurricane Andrew, the Aug. 24, 1992, monster that is the fourth most powerful hurricane on record.

To the west, across the tomato and vegetable fields that stretch toward Florida's famous swamp, is a gated community with day care and a free health clinic that is home to nearly 4,000 agricultural laborers and their families, a vast improvement over the shacks available to field workers before the storm. Many of the children and mothers who live there think federal taxpayer largesse built the Everglades Community Association. But it was really Hurricane Andrew. And on the eastern edge of Miami, the International Hurricane Research Center explores everything from ocean temperature to insurance disaster payouts with high-tech gadgets and a battery of scholars. Many students think the center is one more think tank on a campus sprouting new buildings, financed in part by the burgeoning trade that makes Miami the metropolitan bridge between North and Latin America. But Hurricane Andrew built the center, too.

Indeed, though Andrew killed 15 Floridians and left the southern reaches of Dade County a smoking ruin before moving on to Louisiana and killing eight more, the recovery triggered a boom in Florida that permanently lifted the region well above its former level of economic vitality. And not the least remarkable thing about Andrew's aftermath was the degree to which the rebound was guided by private initiatives and fueled by private capital.

Stewing in frustration

That any good would come from Hurricane Andrew seemed improbable about eight months after the storm when U.S. Sen. Bob Graham, D-Florida, convened hearings in Homestead, a city of about 26,000 when it was savaged by the storm. The April 19, 1993, hearings, called Lessons Learned from Hurricane Andrew, centered on the lackluster federal response. The shouts that erupted would ring bells familiar to Hurricane Katrina survivors. Government agencies of all stripes, and in particular the Federal Emergency Management Agency, were scored by irate Floridians. FEMA crawled rather than ran to their assistance, said residents still picking through the flotsam of their former lives more than a half-year later. The relief apparatus controlled from Washington as well as the Florida capital seemed woefully inept, with people complaining that no one knew whom to call and that the specific duties of various government agencies were hopelessly muddled.

"We can't seem to get anybody to listen," Tom Kirby testified as a representative of the Dade County Farm Bureau. "Everybody keeps talking about let's build more houses, let's get things moving again." Graham, after noting that FEMA "has not been particularly victim-friendly," then drew attention to another whopping shortcoming in the post-Andrew universe. "The more specific and immediately visible example that we are talking of today," the senator said, "is the large amount of debris that remains accumulated on the yards and side streets of South Dade waiting to be removed."

\$100 and a prayer

In fact, the seeds of recovery were already being sown. One of the Johnny Appleseeds was a local banker named Bob Epling, who will long hold a place in Homestead's collective memory as the bedraggled figure seen handing out \$100 bills to desperate residents as they approached him on the street after 175 mph wind gusts subsided and Andrew moved on. Epling, president of Community Bank, had little basis for optimism in the recovery's first hours. He was homeless; his bank, based in Homestead, was littered with shattered glass and twisted blinds. The first few days were as apocalyptic as those New Orleans endured after Katrina. But in the face of the abyss, Epling kept his cool -- and about \$5,000 cash on his person at all times. The banker's acts of street-corner charity-on-demand were an instinctual response to the misery of the people around him, but they were also a blind bet on Homestead's future. "If somebody asked me for money, I just gave it to them," Epling said recently. "And, this is pretty amazing: A lot of it, I mean a lot of it, has come back."

Epling was not the only businessman with the community's well-being in mind. During that first week, a phone began ringing one night somewhere on Community Bank's first floor, where Epling lived with a bag of dirty clothes, a gun and a couple of staffers. At first, he wasn't sure the phone was his. There were no working lines in his corner office and he didn't know there was a live wire in the building. Then an associate stepped over some rubble near the former office door and said, "It's Alvah Chapman. For you." Chapman, then-head of Knight-Ridder and the giant newspaper chain's local property, The Miami Herald, was among the grand old men of local philanthropy. He asked Epling to attend a meeting the following day, the first of 38 early-morning gatherings in the next 50 weeks. It was the moment of inception of the We Will Rebuild committee, a private nonprofit that Chapman had set up to lobby for government aid and to generate, leverage and spend the outpouring of private contributions inspired by the tragedy.

Where to begin?

The task at hand seemed almost as daunting as what New Orleans now faces. Hundreds of thousands of houses, thousands of mobile homes and hundreds of schools and churches appeared to have been annihilated. At Homestead Air Force Base, the direct employer of more than 8,000 people and the anchor of the region's middle class, airmen in concrete pillboxes using infrared lenses had seen Andrew's dozens of microbursts tear the base asunder.

Looting had erupted, if not quite on a scale to rival television images from New Orleans that did so much to poison the well of public affection for the city. "The world was calling us 'HUD-stead,' or 'Deadstead,' all kinds of nice names," said Curt Ivy, Homestead's police chief when Andrew struck and now city manager. "It was so ugly here, it was difficult to get anyone to think about tomorrow," Epling said of Andrew's aftermath. "There wasn't a leaf left. There wasn't a bird. "We began our search for intelligence, for direction, for a map of how we were supposed to do things," he added. "We called New Orleans, we called Charleston, and we were quite disappointed to find out that the body of education on surviving storms just wasn't there."

In the end, the We Will Rebuild committee would have a board of directors numbering 77, with Chapman as chairman and Epling one of two vice chairmen. The group's subcommittees, tackling issues such as agriculture, federal liaison, health, the Air Force base, and even domestic violence, managed to cajole elected officials and others into approving more money and in keeping the focus on southern Dade County. Eventually the group gathered about \$28 million in private donations and used the money, among other things, to finance professional recovery plans for 28 neighborhoods. By exploiting its business contacts and expertise, the committee leveraged its millions into more than \$1 billion, a substantial complement to the \$8.5 billion in federal recovery dollars disbursed in south Florida.

The insurance industry stepped up with another source of private capital that greased the recovery after Andrew in ways that might not be duplicated after Katrina. That's because most of Andrew's damage was caused by wind, not floods or storm surge. Consequently, insurance companies honored the replacement clause in homeowners' policies that, to the woe of many Katrina victims, are not included in flood policies paid by the federal government. Those factors were compounded with what Shahid Hamid, a fellow at the International Hurricane Research Center, described as "extremely generous," quick payouts from an industry not as well versed in hurricanes then as it is after Katrina. It meant a river of cash -- some estimates put it as high as \$21 billion -- poured into a very concentrated area, Hamid said. "Some people even made a lot of money," he noted.

Uncertainty reigns

Even so, the problems did not disappear overnight. Some already dogging New Orleanians persisted in Homeland for months and years. Among them was confusion and uncertainty about who could rebuild and to what standards. Determining the base flood elevation bedeviled post-Andrew rebuilders as did the so-called "50 Percent Rule," a reference to the requirement, still operative post-Katrina, that a home on the flood plain must be declared a total loss under flood insurance rules if damage exceeded half its value, a standard subject to wide-ranging interpretation. "Homeowner uncertainty, incorrect reconstruction, faulty information and changing federal rules have confounded this monumental problem that even now remains uncertain and incomplete," a We Will Rebuild subcommittee report noted a year after Andrew. And in a city mostly pulverized by wind damage, they were dealing with a small number of flooded homes -- about 3,000 that had been hit by storm surge.

We Will Rebuild became, in Chapman's words, "an advocacy group." It was run like a business, hired an administrator and worked out of donated office space where people could stop by or see what was happening. "Recognizing that many community needs could be met by existing organizations and institutions, including governments, and that some needs could be met only by those entities, We Will Rebuild set out to play a role that

would not replace these groups, but would instead help to focus, support and supplement their efforts and resources," Chapman wrote in a one-year annual report.

N.O. lacking focal point

That laser focus and streamlined approach to implementation appear to be missing in New Orleans' first steps, Epling said. He warned that the spate of committees and boards proliferating in Louisiana could be counterproductive. Told of Mayor Ray Nagin's ongoing town hall meetings, Epling winced and waved his hand dismissively. "That's just politics," he said. "You must have that one group or the system can't put itself back together." But of course politics -- the politics of diversity -- played a role in the We Will Rebuild format too. Chapman's retrospective essay notes that Hispanic, African-American and female residents composed "nearly three quarters" of the 77-person board. "It took longer than we thought necessary for people to begin to focus on their future," Epling said. "You've got to have a cohesive, inclusive group. Every color and faith has to be at that table, even though they're not going to win every point."

Hindsight illuminates other key lessons. For example, those businesses that returned quickly fared best, Epling said; laggards lost much of their customer base. New initiatives also were rewarded. Shortly after Andrew, the Cleveland Indians backed out of a commitment to make Homestead their spring training camp. Then the idea was floated for the Homestead-Miami Speedway. Epling provided financing and the track, celebrating its 10th birthday this year, is in use 50 weeks a year, culminating in the Ford Championship, NASCAR's season-ending extravaganza that puts Homestead in the spotlight and money in a lot of wallets. In other areas, the group leveraged its community clout. For example, the committee persuaded the government to leave an Air Force Reserve unit at the Homestead base, and while the facility no longer pumps millions into the local economy, the public-private partnership prevented it from becoming a sinkhole and an eyesore. Controlling the area's image became paramount, and at times that called for a little humbug. Epling recalls a noted economist at a big Florida bank predicting around Thanksgiving that Homestead and the surrounding towns were toast. "He said that while we were down here fighting for our lives," Epling recalled, still a bit miffed. "So we started saying, 'Within three years we'll be back and better than before.' That turned out not to be true, but there was some value to saying it in terms of morale."

Nowhere to live

But some problems ran far deeper than spinmeisters could control. Homestead's acute lack of emergency housing after Andrew, both for residents and for recovery workers, will strike a chord with New Orleanians. "Homestead and the surrounding areas were largely farming country and an Air Force base on the verge of closing down," recalled Stephen Leatherman, chairman of the hurricane research center at Florida International University. The seed money for the center came from what was left in the We Will Rebuild till. "They were losing a lot of their middle class, and a lot of other people looked at it and said, 'I'm history. I'm outta here,' " he said.

Although a precise number is impossible to nail down, most accounts have as many as 700,000 people evacuating the county, many the day before Andrew made landfall. Of that total, about 100,000 did not return, and officials in Homestead estimate the municipal population dropped by about 7,500. Homestead officials say much of the outpouring headed to then-underdeveloped Broward County, triggering a housing boom there that, 10 years later, ricocheted back to Homestead, Florida City and adjacent Naranja Lakes. At the moment, Homestead claims a population of 41,000, almost half again what it was before the storm.

If one single image captured Homestead's plight, it was one that showed annihilated mobile home parks, especially at a camp on the fringe of Florida City managed by the Everglades Community Association. "Our nonprofit had 400 mobile homes, and the day after Andrew we had two with 398 strewn around them," recalled the group's president, Steven Kirk. Kirk didn't need to persuade the county's elders that the park, home to migrant agricultural laborers, was critical. At that point, farming was the backbone of the county's economy and the source of about a third of the nation's tomato, green bean and squash harvests. Assuring laborers they would have housing when the winter crops were harvested in early 1993 was We Will Rebuild's "most vexing and urgent" problem, Kirk said. "It was this huge economic engine that no one wanted to see stopped," he said, noting it still ranks third in terms of Miami-Dade's gross economic production.

Group turns into a force

Moving quickly in a moribund market, the nonprofit took over 54 acres around the destroyed camp and by January 1993 had filled the tract with temporary housing and drafted plans for the permanent community that would succeed it. In addition to donations solicited by the nonprofit nationwide, the group tapped into government money and programs that weren't tied to Katrina, such as those offered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, for example, or the Federal Home Loan Bank. Although the group did receive money from FEMA, it got a bigger boost from a land-use program run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture that gave the nonprofit ownership of an adjoining 108-acre parcel. By the time Congress offered \$20.2 million more to the region in economic development money in 1993, the group had a proven track record and got a small piece of that pie too, Kirk recalled. "It took three years to get back to a sense of normalcy," Kirk recalled. "In essence, Hurricane Andrew rebirthed Everglades Community Association from a local, inexperienced neighborhood group into an innovative and experienced statewide group focusing on affordable housing in rural communities."

Today the Everglades Community Association is a resounding success. Its 443 pastel-colored apartments are home to nearly 4,000 people, all of them connected in some way to local agriculture. There is 10,000 square feet of retail space and a 10-acre park, resplendent with lighting paid for by the National Football League. On her first visit to the spot last month, an Andrew survivor marveled at the improvements. "I got flashbacks during Katrina," Alma Martinez, 22, said. "I remembered being here in a trailer during Andrew when the walls were trembling and all of a sudden I could see the sky. "But look at this now," she said, as children played soccer on the edge of the park. "It's got a day-care center, laundries, a free clinic. It's way different, but it's way, way better."

To New Orleans, where much of the city is still dark and tens of thousands of houses are warped and rotting, Homestead's post-Andrew communities can seem like the stuff of fantasy. But Ivy said such a comeback is within reach. "It's way too early for you guys to panic," he said. "What we learned really early on was that we were on our own. Things took a while to sort themselves out."

Different circumstances

Whether Florida's post-Andrew experience can be replicated in Louisiana post-Katrina could hinge on a crucial difference. Andrew sideswiped Miami and visited its full fury on Homestead, a city 38 miles to the south. That left intact the region's major population center and economic engine, a force that could be applied to the rebuilding effort. It was as if New Orleans had been spared and only Slidell needed to be nurtured back to life after Katrina. The storm also bypassed the political class. By contrast with the plaudits tossed at the We Will Rebuild committee for bringing unity and clarity to Homestead's recovery effort, it's striking how infrequently one hears people mention local politicians much at all. They simply weren't a factor, Kirk said. "We were lucky because 75 percent of what the storm mauled was unincorporated area and so you could get all the politicians affected into one room," Kirk said.

Chapman, now 84 and retired, agrees that the lack of political oversight was an advantage. "We had a weak mayor at the time and a weak formal government in the county that didn't really function," Chapman said. "So that created a strong need for the private sector to come in there, and as a result of the private sector being the main force it was easier to get people to believe in themselves." Eventually the government overcame its confusion and inertia. New building codes were promulgated, with requirements for roofs and windows that helped turn a fragile and wounded zone into one that could attract investment. When the hammering began in earnest, the Florida Legislature passed a We Will Rebuild brainchild, the Hurricane Andrew Recovery/Rebuilding Trust Fund, which was to funnel at least \$500 million in sales tax revenue to the hardest-hit communities in south Florida during the first two years after Andrew struck.

'Much stronger'

With little developable space left in most of Miami-Dade and neighboring Broward counties, a furious land grab finally has reached Homestead and Naranja. One of those capitalizing on the boom is Dionis Cuellar, a developer building single-family units on Andrew-razed patches of land abutting the Florida Turnpike. The new housing must conform to much tougher storm-resistance regulations than before. At first, developers balked at the new rules because they were so expensive, but most have come to embrace them, Cuellar said, pointing to the touches in his own building that are now standard. "A lot has changed since Andrew: You've got the tresses on the roof, re-bar from top to bottom, I-beams above the windows, everything is much stronger," he said, noting that the improvements add "\$20,000 easy" to construction costs.

The new code for Miami-Dade requires supporting braces, called hurricane clips, that fasten the roof to the frame, and the roof must be attached with screws rather than nails. In addition, storm shutters and glass that can withstand winds of up to 146 mph are mandated. "We're very strict on that now," Steve Leatherman at the research center said. "Roofers are so scared of failing inspections. In the past we just did windshield inspections, you know, drive-bys. But too many roofs came off with Andrew."

Although New Orleans' greatest vulnerability is from flooding, not wind, the area's rebuilding would benefit from the adoption of even the smaller items in the Miami-Dade code, said Bill DeGrosso, a former emergency coordinator in Miami-Dade County who is now a private consultant. "Just the hurricane clips alone, if that's done and screws are used during roofing instead of nails, then the resulting damage will be far less," he said. Stricter codes or not, no one is bullet-proof. Hurricane Wilma, a mere Category 1 storm, did a surprising amount of damage in October. Although Miami-Dade, after Andrew, acquired state-of-the-art emergency equipment and built an emergency operations center considered second to none, they were still slow to respond. Wilma-related power outages left thousands without electricity for weeks, the blue roof once again is nearly as ubiquitous in south Florida as in Louisiana, and FEMA has been scrambling to get trailers to Key West. "Wilma made us realize we weren't as good as we thought," Leatherman said. "We even had people screaming for food and water afterward and we had plenty of time to prepare."

Upbeat on New Orleans

For all the differences between Andrew and Katrina, and between New Orleans and Miami, the consensus among Andrew survivors seems to be that New Orleans can replicate their comeback. Epling, for one, considers New Orleans' recovery a near-certainty. Cities are more resilient than even their residents realize, he said, and time will heal many wounds. "It's going to be harder than you think, and it's going to take longer than you think," he warned. "The city of New Orleans, bless you, I don't know how you're going to do it because you've got a very unique problem. But I don't doubt it can be done and will be done."