

2/6/07

“A Killer Storm”

by

Tom Holbrook

Driving home late on Thursday evening, February 1st, a torrential downpour created water accumulation that threatened to pull the car off the road. “We need the rain,” I thought as I slowed down, “but I don’t need to have an accident.” Judy and I talked about the large amount of rain falling but neither of us had any idea it was a harbinger of worse things on the way. We went to bed around midnight and slept soundly until 6:45 am.

Judy had golf lessons at 8:30 and called Palmer’s Golf Academy at 8 am to confirm them and was told the course was closed... too wet they said. A little later our phone rang and it was a friend calling inquiring about our well being. Not understanding his question, he explained that a tornado had come through during the night and destroyed some homes in our area and he was concerned about us. Assuring him we were fine and there was absolutely no damage to our home or those around us, I thanked him for his concern, hung up and turned on the TV. VNN, channel was off the air and at that hour the Orlando stations had only sketchy details so we had no idea how serious things were.

Since we both were up so early, we elected to eat breakfast out and afterward to drive around and see what damage had been done, so we headed to the Son-Rise Café in Southern Trace. We were seated next to a couple I knew so I struck up a conversation asking what they were doing out so early. Bill and Joan told us that they had been at ground zero of the tornado and described the severe damage their home suffered and how Bill barely missed being whisked away in the funnel. Please excuse me if I forget something in the translation here but as they talked I might have missed a point or two because my mind was thinking, “This can’t be really happening here in The Villages.” Bill said he had been sitting on the lanai around 3:30 am then got up and went into the kitchen. Almost as soon as he stepped into the kitchen he heard what sounded like a “bomb” go off... turning he saw it was actually the sound of his windows imploding... all the windows in his home, except a small bathroom window, were demolished.

Looking at the lanai he realized the furniture that had been there moments earlier was now gone and the lanai’s bubble cage was torn asunder and pieces of it were sticking through the now, non-existent windows. Operating on sheer adrenaline, Bill went to check on Joan and found her lying beside the bed where she had dropped when glass began coming at her from the imploding windows. She said glass just flew over top of her and covered the bed. When the wind died down there was not an area on the floor where they could walk without stepping on thousands of pieces of various sized shards of glass... just waiting to rip their feet to shreds.

Surprisingly, Bill said, through it all the lights never went out and checking the phone he found it was also working. He immediately called friends from another village who came right over to help them in whatever way they could. Shortly after their arrival the authorities cordoned off the area thereby preventing other outsiders from coming in and they encouraged Bill and Joan to get what they needed to take with them and leave their heavily damaged home, which they did, taking only the clothes on their backs and a few valuable papers. Joan said they had no idea when they would be able to return to their house and expressed concern about the immediate future.

As we listened to their story, weariness and shock from the ordeal were etching lines in their faces but they spoke all the right words of their thankfulness for being alive and all the expected “what might have been if only...” thoughts, but it was obvious the 5 hours just passed had drained them of their strength. As Judy and I listened it all became real for us that this was not just a casual storm that had blown through... this was a once in a decade, devil tornado that had attempted to rip the heart and hope out of a community. Friends we knew and strangers we would never meet were out there suffering in ways we could not even imagine.

Of those who spent their several minutes of hell inside the jaws of this killing force of wind and water, there were 20 or more who had their lives taken away, and the others had their lives changed forever. Those who came through the storm alive have had their minds indelibly programmed with sounds and sights never before seen, and it will forever change how they view storm clouds on the horizon or listen to the distant rumble of thunder. Although outright fear will reign only in the hearts of a few of the survivors, all will forever maintain a healthy respect for nature’s strength and a desire to be as prepared as possible for any future catastrophic events.

Those of us who were spared the trauma of a one-on-one tornadic experience must learn from those who did, and gain our own respect and sense of preparedness for the future. We wish all those who have suffered loss as a result of this event, the best in the future, and may all of you put your cares into the hand of the only one who can bring true peace into your lives in the coming days. God bless you all!

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