

The everyday heroes of the hurricanes

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Aleen Bell's cell phone rang as she stood in the living room of her flood-ravaged home, surveying the devastation left behind by Hurricane Harvey. The call was from her local union, the Houston Federation of Teachers, asking how she had come through the storm and if she needed help. "It was like an answer to my prayers," Aleen says. Within hours, three of our members were alongside her, pulling up carpet, cleaning and offering encouragement.

There are many such stories in the aftermath of the monstrous and terrifying back-to-back hurricanes, stories of the bravery and compassion of America's emergency personnel and other first responders, including many public school educators and their unions.

These stories represent the best of America, and they are a welcome contrast to the anxiety gripping the country—*anxiety stoked by ugly displays of white supremacy, fears of nuclear conflict, the rescinding of DACA and the possible deportation of millions of young Americans that could come with it, and an economy rigged in favor of the rich.*

I am in Houston as I write this, where residents are beginning the herculean task of hurricane recovery—scrubbing mud, battling mold and tossing once-treasured items onto mountains of debris. It's exhausting both physically and emotionally, but American Federation of Teachers members are trying to make it less so by assisting their students, colleagues and community members affected by hurricanes Harvey and Irma.

Take Kristen McClintock, a special education teacher at Houston's Westside High School and HFT member, who spent the days after Harvey hit at the George R. Brown Convention Center, a cavernous space crammed with evacuees, where she knew that children with autism would be overwhelmed by the noise and commotion. Kristen created a quiet area, provided donated noise-canceling headphones and worked with children with special needs.

Then there's Holland Middle School in Houston, which has welcomed students from a nearby school that suffered extensive damage, as did most of the students' homes. The AFT, in partnership with First Book and the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation, provided every student with books written to help children cope with trauma. In October, we will distribute 36,000 brand-new books to Houston educators for their students and

classrooms. Similar efforts are planned for Florida.

Public schools in the hurricanes' paths sheltered millions of evacuees. In Florida, many emergency school shelters were "staffed" by the schools' teachers, support personnel, nurses, and custodial and cafeteria staff. Now, those same school buildings that barely a week ago served as shelters are humming with the activity of a new school year, and providing normalcy and support to students

wake of disaster is: How can we help? The AFT and our state and local unions reached 85,000 members in the hurricanes' paths via personal text messages in a matter of days. Through these efforts, we identified members, students and their communities in need of everything from cleanup to groceries to shelter, and helped coordinate volunteer recovery efforts.

The need for assistance is enormous, particularly in the Caribbean, where St. John and St. Thomas

Our union's first reaction in the wake of disaster is: How can we help?

struggling with trauma and loss, even as the state grapples with getting the power back on.

These experiences remind us of the central role that public schools play in our communities and in ensuring children's well-being. Knowing how important it was for students and school staff to get back on their feet and back to school, Zeph Capo, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers, led an effort to provide members with relief packages, cleaning supplies and monetary support. Nancy Vera, president of the Corpus Christi AFT, and her members provided backpacks with school essentials to hundreds of students who lost their possessions in the hurricane. And in Volusia, Fla., the staff of Indian River Elementary School went home by home to check on their students after the storm.

This is what unionism is. Many know that we fight for fairness and opportunity, but our first reaction in the

suffered the greatest loss of life and property. The AFT is striving to help. Every dollar contributed to the AFT Disaster Relief Fund goes to victims of these storms. The Essentials for Kids Fund, a partnership between the AFT and First Book to provide basic necessities to students in need and supplies for under-resourced classrooms, has been expanded to aid people affected by the hurricanes. Charity Navigator, an independent charity evaluator, gives First Book a stellar rating, and I encourage you to contribute to the Essentials for Kids Fund at www.firstbook.org.

Solidarity is central to what it means to be a union; we care for each other—our members, the students and patients we serve, and the communities we live in. In these fractured times, it's a reminder of what truly makes America great: people finding their common humanity, pursuing the common good, and caring about their neighbors regardless of their differences.



Weingarten with students at Holland Middle School in Houston on Sept. 15, 2017.

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