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From Inside the Eye of the Storm (Hurricane Irma).

Heather Betts

Alan Betts. My daughter Heather, her partner Peter and their two children have lived for years in Charlotte Amalie on the southern shore of St. Thomas in the US Virgin Islands. On Wednesday September 6, the eye-wall of Hurricane Irma, a category 5 storm, the strongest ever seen in the Atlantic with winds of 180mph, grazed the northern shore of the island. This narrative is a summary of hours of conversations with my daughter.

Heather Betts. As Irma approached, we had bought a month's supply of dry food and bottled water, and cooked a week's supply of rice and beans, since it was too late to leave the island. We stored everything we could in plastic bags. But we started to panic as Irma intensified and the track moved closer and closer to St Thomas. I turned to my father for guidance as he is a meteorologist. We found a small hotel down the hill from our apartment that was more protected and had hurricane shutters. We rented a ground floor room on the eastern end, because my dad said the strongest winds would come from the west. The hotel filled up rapidly as everyone on the north shore was evacuated. We moved in on Tuesday the day before the storm: it was a sleepless night. On Wednesday morning, the wind and rain started. My father was tracking the storm on the Puerto Rico radar, and giving me updates of what to expect when; until we were cut off at 1pm, an hour before the eye-wall reached the island. It was the most terrifying experience of my life, listening to the wind pounding and shaking the walls. At times it sounded like gunshots. We couldn't stop the water from coming through the windows and doors. My 11-yr-old daughter hid in the closet and my 4-yr-old clung to me. Then at the peak of the storm there were screams for help from a room down the hall, but we could do nothing. We thought the hurricane had broken into her room and was carrying them all away, and that our room was next. We got up to move into the bathroom but as we did the bathroom ceiling fell into the tub and onto the toilet. I looked around hopelessly: how could I save my children?

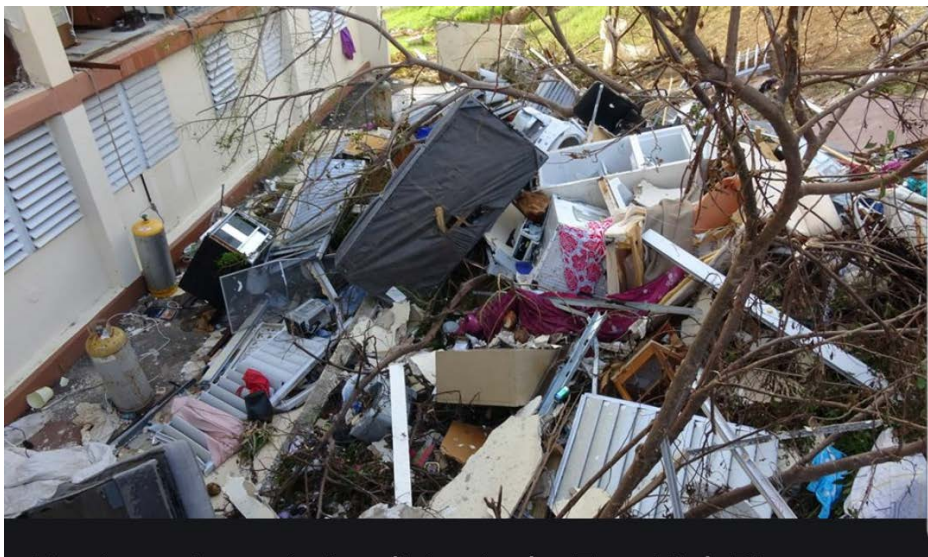
That evening after the storm everyone was in shock. The island lost all power, and may not have power for weeks or months, but the hotel had a generator. All rooms had some damage, and we spent hours and hours sweeping and scooping up water. We shared cell phones as some worked and others didn't. By the morning I got messages to my father and sister, and Facebook told everyone we were OK. There was a 48h curfew for cleanup and to prevent looting, so we could not go and see whether our apartment had survived. We stayed inside: many kids played together in one hotel room. We got news through a friend of mine who moved to St Thomas to run an ambulance service. She and her crew came to our room to charge cellphones and store food in the fridge, working all day to help the injured. The dead

they had to leave in their destroyed homes. Peter was scheduled for surgery on Friday, but part of the hospital roof came off, and the surgical wing and records were destroyed. All critical patients and the injured were being evacuated to other islands by helicopter as the airport was damaged.

My sister, who had lived in Puerto Rico and worked on an East Wind catamaran, found that they were running emergency supplies to the many devastated islands, and evacuating people. She wanted us to get out before Hurricane Jose arrived on Sunday, but when the curfew lifted at noon on Saturday for 6 hours, the roads were in chaos, and the seas were rising. The next day, we got to our apartment, which was OK except that the porch roof had blown away. We took what we could back to the hotel room, and I sorted till 2:30 in the morning. So much we could not take with us. Our landlord's family, from Palestine, had lost the roof of their house. They said they would move into our apartment, and give our possessions to others in need. They were grateful for our food supplies. Their little girl who played with ours will get the toys we left behind.

We made plans to evacuate on Monday. As we left the National Guard were moving emergency food rations into a hotel room; and we heard cruise ships would come in to rescue tourists, and anyone who wanted to go to the US mainland. The curfew was still in effect, but our friend's ambulance took us and others to the marina for evacuation on the catamaran. The damage to the west end of the south shore was much worse. Everything got wet on the boat from the waves, but they fed us - we were so hungry. Friends met us on Puerto Rico, and took us to a place to stay in Luquillo, near where I had lived years ago. Gratefully, we all walked to the shore to swim in the ocean. Power returned the day there we arrived, so we then started washing and drying clothes. It will take us long to recover, but there is a lot to do.

Relief funds for East Wind rescue work: www.gofundme.com/virgin-islands-relief-from-Irma



Wrecked buildings after Irma, five miles east in Tutu, St. Thomas.

