

# AFTER THE DISASTER

## The Long Road to Recovery

Track of  
Hurricane Gilbert,  
Sept. 1988



by Jessica McCurdy Crooks  
Freelance writer, editor and Jamaica native

No one who survives a natural disaster remains untouched by it; the emotional toll runs long and deep.

*"My mother tells a story of her baby brother being stashed in a suitcase to ride out Hurricane Charlie in 1951."*

Hurricane track courtesy of the NOAA Historical Hurricane Tracks site (<http://hsc.noaa.gov/hurricanes>).

**A**s a young girl growing up in Jamaica, I experienced firsthand the destruction of Hurricane Gilbert, a massively powerful storm that ravaged much of the Caribbean in 1988. Now, 25 years later, the announcement of an approaching hurricane still fills me with dread.

Like most of the young people of that tiny island in the Caribbean, I was initially excited at the prospect of experiencing a hurricane. The whole idea seemed like a grand adventure waiting to happen.

If I had known what was to come, I would have been content just to hear once more the story my mother tells of her baby brother being placed in a suitcase during Hurricane Charlie in 1951. Stashing the babe in the suitcase was the only way that my grandparents could keep him safe from the elements as their home was battered by high winds.

For me, there was no suitcase.

Hurricane Gilbert produced a staggering 19-foot storm surge on the coast and brought up to 32 inches of rain in the mountainous inland areas of Jamaica. The resulting flooding and mudslides killed 49 people on my island and left behind billions of dollars in devastation.

### The Incidence of Natural Disasters

Natural disasters are a fact of life, and every region comes with its own potential risks. Earthquake, fire, flood or windstorm, natural disasters occur somewhere in the world at the startling rate of almost one per day, and trends show this is on the increase (EM-DAT, 2001).

Killer tornadoes in the Southern U.S. last summer, the Tohoku earthquake in Japan in March 2011, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, or Super Storm Sandy in October 2012 focus public awareness temporarily. Yet it is after the initial search and rescue efforts are halted and the rebuilding starts that the life-long work of recovery begins, often in private, away from the news crews and the politicians.

### The Impacts of Natural Disasters

For people who have lived through a natural disaster, the effect can be traumatic and long lasting. The economic and psychological toll, combined with the loss of life and community, leave us feeling as if the world as we know it has ceased to exist.

According to Dr. Susanne Babel, it's not just the people who have had direct experience that may suffer from trauma.

"Victims do not need to have experienced the disaster firsthand in order to be psychologically affected," Babel writes. "For example, someone living in San Francisco with relatives in Haiti at the time of the recent earthquake could have been subjected to countless hours of television coverage, coupled with an inability to get information about their own family. This type of situation can take an emotional impact on someone even from afar." (Babel, 2010).

This psychological impact — for both direct victims and observers — can be mild to severe, even rising to the level of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Survivors frequently feel stunned, disoriented, or unable to integrate distressing information. Once these initial reactions subside, people can experience a variety of thoughts and behaviors, including intense or unpredictable feelings; changes in behavior; strained interpersonal relationships; sensitivity to environmental triggers like sirens, smoke or loud noises; and stress-related physical symptoms (American Psychological Association, 2014).

According to a United Nations report, since 2000, natural disasters have cost the global economy \$2.5 trillion (Maskrey, 2013). In Jamaica alone, the total damage from Hurricane Gilbert was in excess of US\$4 billion. The island's agricultural sector felt the brunt of the storm's destructive forces, and almost all of the island's hospitals and medical facilities were damaged or destroyed.

### Stories of Recovery

Roger Busbice rode out the ravages of Hurricane Andrew in Bayou Vista, Louisiana. Like anyone who lives in a





Hurricane Gilbert left a legacy of destruction and changed lives in its wake 25 years ago.

hurricane-prone area, Busbice knew what preparations to take. And yet, like so many, he did not start his preparations far enough in advance of the approaching storm.

“Theoretically, I was prepared, but I didn’t start collecting water in the bathtub and getting supplies like canned food, drinking water, batteries and bourbon until the hurricane was very close,” Busbice said during our telephone conversation.

Busbice’s roof and windows were damaged by Andrew’s wild winds. His car was immersed in the flood waters, and a tree limb inflicted further damage to the vehicle when it fell on top of it. His family was left without basic amenities like water and electricity for two weeks.

Not surprisingly, Busbice said that the worst of it was not having running water for such a long period. After all this time, he vividly remembers his first cup of coffee in three days, provided by Oklahoma Baptist Church relief volunteers.

Busbice noted that the lasting effect of having lived through Hurricane Andrew is twofold. One aspect is the “abundance of stories I now have to tell the grandchildren and anyone else who will listen.” Secondly, his wife has insisted that in the future, he is not allowed to stay and “guard the property” as he did in 1992.

#### A Life Shaken to the Core

John Jaksich’s experiences of disaster were vastly different. His own home was not damaged in the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989, but like others who have witnessed a natural disaster, it prompted a change in the way he and his family view their lives.

“The Bay Bridge was supposed to be able to withstand such a quake, but was shown to be unsafe,” he said. “After the quake, whenever we needed to go into the city, we would joke about not coming back as we drove across the repaired Bay Bridge. I suppose it made us more aware of our own mortality.”

Jaksich’s reaction was to move away from the area, and, unlike Busbice who often repeats the stories of his experience, he tries not to think about the events too often.

#### Coping After a Disaster

As my own community began the long road to recovery, I watched my dad and the other men work at deepening the small canal that ran parallel to the houses in our neighborhood. They also planted trees at the edge of the canal to help contain the soil and provide a break against rising floodwaters.

I wonder if they knew that this work, this physical effort to regain a sense of control over their environment, was an important step in the recovery process for our whole community. Helping yourself and others to reclaim a bit of their lives — whether by manual labor, donating to charity, or simply offering comfort and a cup of coffee can help survivors realize they have the strength and skills needed to get through the challenges ahead (Smith and Segal, 2014).

Apart from the physical recovery, Smith and Segal note there is also emotional work to be done.

“Sadness, grief, anger and fear are normal reactions to the loss of safety and security (as well as life, limb and property) that comes in the wake of a disaster. Accepting these feelings as part of the grieving process, and allowing yourself to feel what you feel, is necessary for healing.”

They suggest being patient with the pace of your emotional recovery and of those around you; not everyone grieves at the same pace, and not ev-

eryone feels things the same way. Allow yourself to feel what you are feeling, with no judgment, and talk about your feelings in a way that feels safe.

Build in time to rest and relax to combat the stress in the aftermath of a disaster, and be sure to reconnect with your loved ones and friends in any way you can, giving and taking support from your shared experience.

Disasters are around us all the time, and with the 24-hour news cycle it is easy to get in too deep as witnesses to the mayhem. A healthy interest in what happened is fine, but it can easily

turn to obsession, which in turn can cause additional anxiety and trauma. Limit your media exposure, turn off the TV or online news, and be especially mindful of this exposure around children, who don’t have the capacity to understand what they are seeing (Smith and Segal, 2014).

Disasters are a part of life, and no one is immune to these natural forces. When life changes forever, we begin to recover when we realize we can take steps to regain our sense of power and control in a world in which things have gone mad. ♦

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