

JC natives struggle to leave Florida

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A husband and wife who are Jefferson City natives found themselves directly in the path of Hurricane Irma this weekend — the second hurricane they would have had to ride out in the same part of Florida. As an added twist to their cyclonic tale, their Cape Coral home originally belonged to another family member who just survived Irma's fury on the Caribbean island of St. Thomas.

The News Tribune spoke with Lea Ann Deatherage at about 11:30 a.m. CST on Saturday, prior to the family's decision to leave their home.

Deatherage and her husband Bryan were born and raised in Jefferson City. They will have been married 25 years next month, and she said they're both graduates of Jefferson City High School.

The first hurricane the couple experienced in Florida was Hurricane Charley in 2004, just two months after they moved to the Sunshine State.

"Charley we stayed for, because that came all of a sudden" and made a quick turn to hit where no one expected it to, she said. Charley hit as a Category 4 storm, but she said their home then only lost a few shingles. She attributed the minimal damage to their home being built up-to-code for hurricanes.

"When the hurricane (was) actually going through, I felt like Dorothy in 'The Wizard of Oz,'" with the whole house shaking, she said of their experience in Charley.

The couple lived in Florida until 2007, moved back to Jefferson City and then stayed until last year, when Bryan got transferred back to Florida for his job with FedEx. Lea Ann said they have three grown children.

Bryan's mom, Carmen, of Jefferson City, said the Deatherage's son Mason, 21, who goes to school and works in Florida, is with mom and dad. Their other two children are Megan, 27, who lives and works for FedEx in Columbia, and Madison, 21 — Mason's twin sister — who is a senior at Mississippi State University.

Lea Ann said she and Bryan made plans to evacuate ahead of Irma, but circumstances prevented that feasibly happening, at least until Saturday morning.

She made a hotel reservation up north in the Tampa area on Monday. She said that took a full day in itself to do, because so many lodging sites were already full of evacuees from the east coast of Florida.

Carmen added another wrinkle was finding a place that would allow them to take their pets — a big dog and a cat.

Then, as Irma's track shifted westward to the Gulf coast of the state, Lea Ann got a call Friday night notifying her their hotel reservation had been cancelled because that area had been put under a mandatory evacuation order too.

"The zig-zag between the east coast and the west coast has created a big chaos," she said. Although a shift to the west might spare the Miami metro area at least some

amount of damage, she explained a lot of the people who were ordered to leave Miami traveled west to evacuate or to continue on further north on Interstate 75.

That's meant massive traffic gridlock on the west coast too, along with widespread fuel shortages. She said Florida Highway Patrol officers had to escort tanker truck deliveries to gas stations.

"My husband's been very leery about getting out on the roads and (then) not being able to find gas," she said.

In addition to all those logistical challenges, she said she had to work in her health care job until noon Friday. "A lot of people had to stay and work," she said.

So, the Deatherages remained in Cape Coral and were working to finish securing their home on Saturday morning. She said they've taken over their brother's house since they moved back last year, as he lives and works on the U.S. Virgin Island of St. Thomas, which Irma devastated earlier in the week.

Lea Ann wondered what the odds were of the same hurricane hitting two siblings in two different places.

She said her brother, Alan Bray, and his wife Tracey are OK, though Bray's been told they could be without power for a month or two. The campus of the University of the Virgin Islands where he's worked for about three years has also sustained major damage and is closed until further notice. He's told her a lot of nearby homes there have had their roofs blown off, and tarps to cover the holes are scarce.

Track models Saturday placed the Deatherages' home in the dangerous northeastern quadrant of Irma, which was forecasted to scrape the Gulf coast of Florida on or near the shoreline. Like all other hurricanes in the western hemisphere, the northeastern quadrant is the most intense part of the storm in terms of rain, wind and storm surge.

Lea Ann and Bryan's home is a concrete block house. She said they had reinforced the garage door with 2-by-4 boards, brought in outdoor items and had made sure they had a mattress handy in case they needed to put it against the sliding glass door.

Their main concern was the direct access canal adjacent to the home; she said their home is about 15 feet above sea level.

The Weather Channel on Saturday forecasted a peak storm surge for the Naples-Fort Myers area of Florida at 10-15 feet. Cape Coral is included in this area. Hurricane-force winds were expected to begin late this morning, with the strongest winds coming tonight.

Lea Ann said about half their neighbors stayed to try to ride out the storm in their homes, too.

However, shortly after the News Tribune talked with Lea Ann Saturday, Carmen said the couple told her they felt the situation had gotten too dangerous, and they left. She said when Bryan started telling her where their life insurance policies were, she knew they were scared, especially of the forecasted storm surge.

Carmen said the family was headed toward Orlando, where although the Disney World amusement park was closed, they had managed to find a hotel room in one of the park's still-open resorts — and they got to bring their pets.

"We bugged out after the last update at (noon CST)," Lea Ann texted. "Got all of our emergency stuff together in 45 minutes and left for Orlando to stay at Disney. Took us almost 4 hours to get here. Orlando is only two hours away," she wrote.

As of Saturday morning, before they had finally evacuated, Lea Ann said the sky above their home in Cape Coral was overcast, “kind of calm,” but with constant wind gusts of maybe 30-40 miles per hour.

“They said the bands should start coming in later this afternoon,” she said.

Rain had not yet started to fall, though, “you can certainly tell something’s coming in,” she said.