

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Charley and me

Or, Forever cured of my fascination with storms

Before I left for a week vacation to visit my mother in Sarasota, Fla. and my son in Washington D.C., I laughingly said to my family, "Well, I'll be visiting a couple of dangerous spots—Florida during hurricane season and DC under Orange Alert."

Before I left I had heard reports about tropical storm Bonnie heading for the Florida panhandle and worried about flying over that but was not very concerned about the lesser news of hurricane Charley brewing around in the Caribbean. It didn't take long for my thoughts to be dwelling on "Charley."

I arrived Wednesday night, August 11, in time to have a good visit with my mother who was to be 96 years old on August 14th. She was temporarily in the health care center of Plymouth Harbor, a retirement community in a high rise reaching 27 stories. It is located on John Ringling Blvd., which leads from the mainland at Sarasota to Long Boat, Lido and St. Armond's Keys. They are what we now know as the "barrier islands," the residents of which were told to evacuate by midnight Thursday. Plymouth Harbor, although included in this category, is considered a shelter, so the residents didn't have to leave. Most of them, that is.

I stayed in my parent's apartment. Thursday morning, my mother and I heard the news that she would have to be evacuated inland to a nursing home and that I couldn't go with her. According to law, residents of nursing homes and those with special needs must be moved. My visit was to be from Wednesday evening through Saturday, so for a good chunk of my visit we were not going to be able to see each other.

Since my mother had been in the health care center for ten days, the food supply in her refrigerator was not very appealing. The dining room was open on Thursday, but late in the day the announcement was made that it would not be open Friday and utilities were not guaranteed. I pitched most of her food Wednesday night and had two pieces of rye bread in rather questionable condition for supper and two for breakfast Thursday morning. Luckily for me, I saw a friend of my mother's on Thursday morning who was waiting for the bus to take her shopping. She agreed to get me some milk and bread. Later in the day, she gave me that, plus fruit and lunchmeat. I was rich.

The bridge connecting the islands was closed at midnight Thursday. The entire east wall of the apartment on the tenth floor looked down on the bridge. I spent six hours with my mother on Thursday until over 40 health care center residents were unbelievably organized and put onto fancy buses. My little mother was sitting by a window and I waved good-bye, saying

"Thanks for coming! I'll see you when you get home." At least she left with a smile on her face.

On Wednesday night I received my first hurricane instructions—fill the bathtub with water (for toilet flushing), get bottles of drinking water (check), find a flashlight (okay), get extra batteries (too late.) I charged my cell phone. What was left of Thursday I spent talking on the phone with husband, brother, children, even grandchildren who were all in Illinois and concerned about us. Most were aware of my fascination with storms and figured I was getting just what I deserved. I was actually in the safest place around. There were 40 staff people staying overnight and as long as necessary at Plymouth Harbor.

Upon hearing the news that hurricane

Charlie was due to hit somewhere on the West Coast of Florida, my husband remarked, "I love you a lot more than I did five minutes ago." I said oh that was nice, and I'd file that remark away for future reference. Thursday night I stayed up late to watch the dire predictions for the next day. Every major television station reported on the hurricane around the clock. There were no regular programs on CBS, NBC and ABC.

I ordered a box lunch for sometime Friday.

Friday morning about 4am I heard thunder and lightening and my adrenalin overwhelmed the Tylenol PM I had taken the night before. By 6:35 I was dressed, make-up on, had breakfast and decided to go outside while I still could. It was going to be a very long day. The hurricane wall was closed over the doors and windows in the lobby, making it dark and foreboding. I took my purse, thinking I might find a newspaper, cup of coffee, anything. How stupid is that? No one was allowed over the bridge after midnight the night before.

What an eerie experience it was walking along the four lane John Ringling Blvd., usually so busy it's worth one's life to get onto it with a car. Friday morning at 7:30 there was not a human being in sight, except for an occasional service vehicle. Not only was there no coffee shop open, naturally everything on St. Armand's Circle was boarded up. What was I thinking? But then, it was all hard to comprehend. In 15 years of visiting this area I had never walked along the other side of this four-lane boulevard, so I scampered across the strangely empty street to take a closer look. But I was beginning to feel like an idiot, frankly, being the only person in sight and carrying a purse, no less.

At 8:30am the sky was getting dark and the water beginning to ripple. The first signs of Charley, I thought, which by then was expected to barrel up the gulf coast and maybe go inland at Tampa Bay. At this point we know the hurricane is moving 18 miles an hour and producing winds of 110 to 160 miles an hour. The storm surge was expected to be 8, 15, 40 feet.

By 11:30 we have been told we will go to the center of the building, on our "colony" floor. Every other floor has a center of either a balcony or sitting area and since I was on the 10th floor, when the time came, I was to proceed to the ninth floor "living room." In the meantime, mother called several times and I was glad to be able to visit with her. She said she was comfortable but the place was a "madhouse."

On television it was announced that the water and electricity would be turned off in the evacuated areas to avoid fires and water contamination.

By 2pm we learned the storm was a Category four and was expected to hit land at Ft. Myers and Port Charlotte, and head northeast, not go up the gulf towards Tampa Bay and us. At 3:30 the loudspeaker instructed us to head for our "safe place." Off I go to the ninth floor with my flashlight, water, cell phone, pillow, blanket and book. I was greeted with the sight of party preparations, bottles of wine, water and snacks were set-up and residents began to arrive with more food. Most were in a festive mood, actually, and I visited with people who had known my father and know my mother.

Oblivious to what was going on outside, we visited until the Plymouth Harbor administrator stepped off the elevator

at about 5:30 and said gravely, "We have dodged the bullet." By six o'clock we were allowed to go back to our apartments and by 8pm the evacuated residents of the barrier islands near us were pouring over the bridge, returning to their homes.

The residents of Sarasota and Tampa Bay areas were obviously breathing a sigh of relief, but we certainly learned that hurricanes cannot yet be very accurately predicted. The idea that they lose strength when they hit land was debunked as Charley plowed through inland towns and maintained 145-mile winds all the way up through the middle of the state—Lake Wales, Kissimmee and Orlando. Gulf residents had been told to evacuate east, some going to the very spots where the hurricane eventually hit.

Saturday morning, August 14, my mother's 96th birthday, she arrived home from her shelter. As it turned out, for two

nights she slept on a mattress on the floor, which was not very comfortable for an old woman with arthritis. The staff sang happy birthday and brought balloons. That night I brought down a bottle of Jim Beam and some mix for drinks before dinner in her room. She was prepared for bed and the lights were turned down and we whispered until 10pm that night.

The next morning, in Charley's wake, I headed for Washington DC to meet my son who is in the Army and stationed at Ft. Myer, Va. Now he was going to take care of HIS old mother for a while! What a wonderful visit we had.

And I haven't even told you about the interesting people I met on the planes.

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