

Hurricane Ike draws together Children at Heart Ministries family

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HOUSTON—Volunteers, staff and residents of [Children at Heart Ministries](#) facilities testified they learned important lessons from Hurricane Ike: Disasters can draw families closer together and bring them closer to God. And God can bring good results out of bad circumstances.

Staff at Gracewood in Houston noted the single mothers and children who live at the facility endured Hurricane Ike and its aftermath with courage, grace, humor and thanks for God's providence in time of storm.

Workers and residents at Texas Baptist Children's Home in Round Rock and Miracle Farm in Brenhan saw the challenges faced by Gracewood as an opportunity to step up and help a member of the Children at Heart family.

Volunteers from Miracle Farm and Gracewood helped repair the damage at Gracewood. They are (seated left to right) Gracewood Executive Director Debbie Rippstein; Donald House from Harmony Baptist Church; David House; Jason House; DJ House, a former Miracle Farm resident; Bronson Baker; Trey House; (standing) Gracewood Maintenance Supervisor Samuel Flores; Duck House; Joe Baker, a Miracle Farm house dad; Miracle Farm Manager Mike Gallaway; Ronnie Ramsey, a Miracle Farm house dad; David Jones, a Miracle Farm house dad; and Jason Goree of Gracewood. Hidden behind Debbie Rippstein is House Dad Christopher Welch. (PHOTO/Children at Heart)

Three of the four mothers at Gracewood stayed home during the hurricane. One mom and her two children, who had been through Katrina in New Orleans and did not want to be separated again, went to stay with family.

Nerves were frayed

But on the night before Hurricane Ike hit, nerves were frayed and children were frightened as three single mothers—one of them eight months pregnant—and six young children hunkered down to ride out the storm with resident mentor Leslie Goree; her husband, Jason; and their infant son, Luke.

A few days later during a Bible study, 11-year-old Christopher asked if he could give a testimony.

“I was really scared during the storm, but my mom told me to pray. And I prayed that no trees would hit Gracewood,” he said. “When I woke up the next morning, none had. God answered my prayer.”

While the Gracewood residence was mostly spared, damage to the surrounding property included wooden gates and fences blown over, a chain-link fence down and trees toppled. But the house escaped damage other than the loss of a few shingles.

“The yard looked like pick-up sticks, with trees and branches everywhere,” said Gracewood program coordinator Kiki Carey. “But not one tree fell on Gracewood. Christopher saw his prayers answered, and he learned, ‘If God can answer this prayer, what else can he do for me?’”

Two weeks without electricity

In the aftermath of the storm, Gracewood went two weeks before electricity was fully restored. That, in turn, led to other blessings.

Until generators arrived, Gracewood had four days with no power

whatsoever. With everyone home from work and from school, it became an adventure and a bonding opportunity for the moms who spent one day playfully braiding each other's hair and cleaning each other's refrigerators and for their children who discovered that a world without television isn't really all that bad.



Volunteers worked to clear debris and repair damage at Gracewood in the aftermath of Hurricane Ike.
(PHOTO/Children at Heart)

The extended family of Children At Heart Ministries was quick to step in to help. Maintenance Supervisor Mike Oehlert from Texas Baptist Children's Home arrived with two generators, electrical supplies, fuel cans, a chainsaw and other much-needed items. Children At Heart Ministries President Jerry Bradley delivered bottled water.

Three days after Ike hit, workers from Miracle Farm at Brenham arrived. Farm Manager Mike Gallaway led five Miracle Farm house dads and Bronson Baker, the son of the one of the dads, in helping with some major clean-up on the Grocewood property.

Six volunteers joined Gallaway's crew, including former Miracle Farm resident DJ House; his grandfather, Donald; his father, David; his uncle, "Duck;" and two of Duck's sons, Trey and Jason. Robert Williams from Brenham sharpened and donated chains for chainsaws for the Miracle

Farm volunteers to use at Gracewood.

The volunteers from Brenham took time away from Miracle Farm, which suffered some minor damage of its own after receiving a glancing blow from the hurricane and was making its facilities available for evacuee families.

Search for a woodchipper

One major need at Gracewood was for a wood chipper—a piece of equipment in seriously short supply in the storm-ravaged Houston area—to help clear debris and tree branches.

Ten days after the storm, Miracle Farm Campus Administrator Jeremy Cole located one in Waco through his dad, Charles Cole, director of missions for F.I.R.M. Baptist Area. Miracle Farm Executive Director Jack Meeker drove from Brenham to Waco to pick it up so that the Miracle Farm work crew could deliver to Gracewood.

Meanwhile, an extended family of Baptists, including several from F.I.R.M. Baptist Area, donated sheets, pillows, blankets and other items to help Miracle Farm prepare for evacuees who sought refuge on the Brenham campus.

Several F.I.R.M. Area and Creath-Brazos Association churches and individuals also provided and served meals for evacuees staying at Miracle Farm. These included Champion Fellowship, Independence Baptist Church and Greenvine Baptist Church from the Brenham area, and College Station's Parkway Baptist Church and Living Hope Baptist Church. Mary Beach of Brenham and Robert and Pat Collins from a steakhouse in Snook also provided meals.

"God is good," said Gracewood Executive Director Debbie Rippstein. "He brought us through the storm with no injuries and no irreplaceable damage

and then he provided this wonderful ministry and great friends to help us put the pieces back together. We are blessed and so grateful for those who reached out to help us.”

“Children At Heart Ministries is a family,” Bradley said. “And when a family member is in need, we step up to help. The staff at Gracewood showed its love for the single mothers and children who live there and our other ministries showed their love for Gracewood. Sometimes it takes a natural disaster to show just how much we care for one another.”