

to all friends and family,

to say the last few days have been difficult is an understatement. unfortunately, the damage from hurricane helene will take months, even years, to repair. this part of the state is devastated, with many roads and bridges gone and travel impossible to some of the more remote areas. i am writing you a summary of what i witnessed the past five days, partly to let to know how i am doing, and partly to help me deal with the reality of what i have been through.

i am a red cross volunteer as the lead shelter worker in watauga county (where boone is located). on wednesday, i got the call to begin preparing a shelter for persons who might be displaced by the storm. i and two other volunteers moved our red cross equipment trailer to the site of our designated shelter, the Alliance Bible Fellowship (ABF), located on one of the main roads leading into boone. this is a huge church, with a large gymnasium that we planned to use for the primary sleeping area for our clients. we took a minimal number of cots and snacks and water inside the church thursday evening.

simultaneously, the Watauga Amateur Radio Club was tasked to provide emergency radio communication at the shelter. i am the one who recruited volunteers for that job, and i also serve as one of the volunteer Ham radio operators. we have 8 Ham radio volunteers, and our hope was to do shift work during as much of the time the shelter was operational as possible.

by friday morning at 5:10am, the shelter was officially activated. i was at ABF shortly after 4:00am, with another red cross

volunteer and one Ham who had spent the night there. i cannot recall exactly when we lost the power there, but it was fairly early friday. at that time, the rain was torrential, and the church walls literally had rain water flowing in sheets. even with continuous mopping and strategic placement of buckets to capture the leaks, we could not keep up with the rush of water.

it became clear we could not stay there, and a volunteer red cross worker (at the next level of volunteers) began trying to arrange for another shelter location. even as he was searching for that, we began receiving refugees from the storm. people were brought by firefighters and the police and some just walked there. a few were able to drive their cars, but most had nothing but the clothes on their backs. the stories they told were heartbreaking.

they came with their dogs, cats, babies, kids. some in wheelchairs, some with various medical conditions. luckily the health department sent two nurses and a couple of social workers to work with the folks who clearly were in shock as they described what they had been through. one man had to swim across a creek holding his dog overhead to get to safety. another reported that he had to watch as his neighbor's house broke apart and was washed away as she was trying to escape through a window.

once they got to the shelter, we had to quickly create a space to keep the animals separate from other clients, which necessitated using 3 smaller rooms off the one larger room that had not yet flooded. we also utilized one room for some families with children. the only food we could offer was power bars and chips

and water. luckily, we had some towels for those who came in soaking wet, and also some dry clothes for those in real distress.

communications with cell phone became difficult, even impossible, as cell towers and power went down all over the county. thank goodness we had the Ham operators with their battery powered radios. one message that was particularly disturbing was from a place in the county where 15 people had gone for shelter (this was not an official red cross shelter), and their shelter was hit by a mudslide that took out their propane tank and generator. they were desperate to get to our site to be safe, as they had no supplies and were in such a dangerous situation. they tried to get to us, but the roads from their remote site to the ABF were impassable.

as the afternoon continued, we began receiving busloads of refugees from one apartment complex that was totally flooded. folks from that complex lost their cars as well as their belongings. we were over capacity quickly, but we kept thinking we would be moved soon. plus, we were hoping we would get some real food for all these people. we were running out of bottled water and there was a boil water alert for all those using boone's water. things were going downhill fast.

sometime late that afternoon or early evening, we got the order to evacuate the ABF shelter. we were bused to the App State convocation center, which had flooding on the ground floors, but was intact at the concourse level. i went with the first group of evacuees and worked with the facility manager to determine where we could set up the cots and our boxes of blankets and supplies.

soon after the rest of the red cross and radio volunteers and clients arrived, the university brought over hot dogs for our supper. there was plenty of bottled water, snacks, and several university staff and volunteers who helped us get organized quickly. again, pets and their owners had to be kept separate from the others, but there was plenty of room to spread out there in the concourse area. and best of all, they had electricity there!

we all tried our best to work with these poor folks who had lost so much and were walking around in shock, some sobbing, some agitated, most having experienced a terrifying ordeal just getting to safety. my military background helped me keep from breaking down in the face of so much hardship, but it was not easy.

i won't detail all the scenarios that we encountered as we continued to receive clients late into the night. we all did our best, and by morning the worst of the storm had passed. the university again provided food for breakfast, lunch and dinner. we also had students who began showing up to volunteer their help, and we had received additional supplies from the red cross.

while all this was going on, i was naturally concerned about my immediate family. ben had called me during the worst of the storm to check on my safety (he didn't know i was manning a red cross shelter). the damage to his neighborhood was catastrophic, but his entire family was safe. his next door neighbor's house was washed away by the floods, plus he reported seeing propane tanks swept along in the water, and

transformers exploding as they rushed past. there will be no need for me to tell my grandkids about this horrible disaster-- they were part of it.

i had not been to my home since wednesday, and i had run out of the small supply of prescription medication i brought with me, so i was willing to risk a trip to my rental home today (sunday) to see what had happened out there. my cherished friend JJ had power and water and was waiting to put me up at her home. my plan was to grab meds and some clean clothes from my place and then drive back to JJ's.

i left the shelter around 10:00 am and followed the one route that i thought might be passable to get me home. it was only 10 miles from boone, but the drive was harrowing, mostly one lane once i got off hwy 421 onto hwy 194. i had to drive over downed power lines and underneath leaning trees and more power lines that were being held aloft by a small twig stuck into the ground. rockslides, mudslides, debris everywhere. i have driven worse roads, but only in a combat zone.

i was elated to finally make it home and to find that my house was totally intact, no damage other than leaves and small branches on the deck and the flag pole base broken. my landlords, who live up the drive from me, had worked hard to clear the driveway and it was rough, but totally drivable. i checked in with them before going back to my cabin, where i quickly emptied my freezer and much of the fridge, gathered meds and other necessary supplies, and began the journey back to boone and safety with friend JJ.

forgive me for going on so long in this email, but i needed to get this off my chest. this has been a very tough time for those of us in western north carolina, and i'm sure there is more to come. thanks to all of you for listening to my story. please keep yourselves safe.