

# Utter Destruction

*In the aftermath of Hurricane Michael, communities begin the long road to healing*

By Pam Blair

On October 9, 2018, the night before Hurricane Michael made landfall, Gulf Coast Electric Cooperative Lineman Jason Curry joined nine other employees at the Southport office to wait out what was projected to be a Category 2 storm.

His family—wife Brandi, daughter Madison and sons Wes and Brason—stayed with friends 5 miles away until the intensity of the storm increased to Category 4 status literally overnight.

“At 4 a.m. I called my friend and said, ‘You have to get out,’” Jason says.

His family moved on to Columbus, Georgia, where they stayed with friends.

Jason remained behind with co-workers, waiting to begin power restoration efforts even before the power went out.

As Michael approached the area, rain poured in around windows and through holes in portions of the roof the wind had peeled away, flooding member services areas, warehouses and conference rooms.

CEO John Bartley and others staying in the Wewahitchka office heard a loud crack and watched through a window as their solid steel radio communications tower was blown down.

“It was four hours of hell,” Jason says.

Among those hunkered down in the Southport office was Kristin Evans, vice president of marketing and communications. She said the nonstop freight train noise from the hurricane was terrifying.

“Rather than panic, we stayed together and tried to stay upbeat,” says Chief Operating Officer Francis Hinson, who has weathered many storms in his 33-year career—none as devastating as Michael.

“Until we got out of the building, we



**Gulf Coast Electric Cooperative Lineman Jason Curry and his 9-year-old son, Brason, embrace five days after Hurricane Michael. It was the first time the two had seen each other since the storm hit.**

Photo by Francis Hinson

didn't realize how bad it was,” Kristin says. “It was shocking. I thought, ‘We're lucky we're not dead. I hope people are OK.’”

Entire stands of trees and power poles snapped like toothpicks, littering roadways. The 2,600 miles of power line serving GCEC's 21,000 meters were ripped apart and tossed amidst the debris.

“We could not even make it a block down any road without a chain saw to cut the thousands of downed trees off the roads,” John says. “Tree damage was so extensive most roads were impassable.”

But that was just the start.

Jason estimates at least half of the homes in the area—including his and several other GCEC employees'—were wiped out, either blown off their foundations or left unlivable because of extensive structural damage and moisture.

“It was widespread,” Jason says. “It had no respect for person or property. It took out everything. Big homes. Small homes. It was a life-changing event.”

Just days after the hurricane, Air Force Captain Nathan McWhirter arrived at Tyndall Air Force Base, served by GCEC.

“It looked like a complete war zone,” he told his public affairs officer.

Without a single meter turning, PowerSouth Energy Cooperative officials dubbed the area ground zero. PowerSouth—which provides generation and transmission services to GCEC—had 448 miles of transmission line and 46 substations out of service.

## **The Process of Rebuilding Lives**

The hurricane left behind shattered lives, with loss of personal property, loss of housing options, loss of business access, loss of jobs and loss of normalcy.

But it also left behind a determination to persevere and overcome.

“Crises can tear communities down, but they can bring people together, too,” says Gary Smith, president and CEO of PowerSouth. “It was remarkable to see the communities and people come together and work together to rebuild lives.”

Rallying the troops was no easy feat.

“Hurricane Michael took out every one of our communications systems,” John says. “We had no internet, no computers, no Facebook, no truck radios.”

Jason and fellow employee Jeff Carter were the only GCEC employees who could pick up a cellphone signal.

Working from the tailgate of his truck, Francis used those phones to summon reinforcements. Ultimately, 1,600 contract workers and mutual aid crews from cooperatives around the country arrived to help GCEC's 80 employees repair the catastrophic damage.

Unable to carry out her usual communications duties, Kristin shifted her efforts to assisting Francis by arranging food, shelter, laundry and shower facilities to support incoming workers, and ordering fuel and materials.

“It took 75 years to build this system,” Francis says. “It was destroyed in a few hours, rebuilt in three weeks and will take several years to completely fix.”

That Herculean effort was aided by



**This Panama City home near County Road 2321 was one of thousands destroyed by Hurricane Michael. Blue tarps in the background cover other roofs.**

Photo by Earl Gaskin

mutual aid crews that worked alongside GCEC staff, logging 16-plus hours seven days a week for up to two weeks before co-ops rotated in replacement crews.

“You are dog tired, but you don’t want to quit,” Lineman Brian Rhymes of Glades Electric Cooperative says of the long hours. “It’s hard to watch people’s faces as you pull out, knowing that even though you will be back in the morning, they have to spend another night in the dark. When the lights come back on, their smiles make it all worth it.”

Escambia River Electric Cooperative Lineman Kevin Macht left his wife and



**Gulf Coast Electric Cooperative Manager of Operations Andy Dick, center, addresses restoration workers.**

Photo by Rebecca Green



An aerial view of east Lynn Haven off Titus Road and Highway 231. The photo captured by drone shows the wide swath of devastation.

Photo courtesy of PowerSouth Energy Cooperative

four little ones at home to respond to GCEC's call for help.

North of Wewahitchka, a 3- or 4-year-old girl sat on her porch, watching Kevin work. It was suppertime, but the crew was committed to finishing the job.

"You see that and you want to do everything you can to help," Kevin says. "Our kinfolk live just south of Wewa. That's really close family."

"There is nothing better than getting out there and doing what you were trained to do to help someone out," says Matt Perry of Glades Electric Cooperative.

"It is truly remarkable that co-ops all over our nation can come together and work shoulder to shoulder," says Van Crawford, vice president of operations for Peace River Electric Cooperative, who helped map out restoration work. "I can't say enough how proud I am to be a part of the cooperative world."

Hurricane-hardened lineworkers were shocked by the extent of damage.

"Ivan was a thunderstorm compared to Michael," says EREC Foreman David Deese, who has responded to storms for 21 years. "It was like a 700-mile tornado."

Co-worker Mark LeFlore says pictures don't do justice to the scope of damage.

"I saw a 100-year-old oak tree that was 8 feet at the base of the trunk laying on the ground, root ball and all," he says.



Bucket trucks line up to load some of the 10,000 poles needed to rebuild Gulf Coast's distribution system.

Photo courtesy of PowerSouth Energy Cooperative

"You had to be there to believe it."

"It was mindblowing," adds EREC's Matthew Reynolds. "It was every house. Nothing went untouched."

"The damage from Michael far exceeded Irma," Van says. "If I had to sum it up in one word it would be trauma."

Brian from Glades and Andy Baxter from Florida Keys Electric Cooperative say Hurricane Michael reminded them of Hurricane Andrew, but on a bigger scale.

"It was overwhelming," Andy says.

Irma took out about 150 FKEC poles. GCEC is replacing around 10,000.

### An Outpouring of Neighborliness

Despite their personal losses, people living in makeshift shelters next to slabs where homes had been greeted crews with expressions of gratitude: cold water, hot food, snacks and thank yous.

"People there made you feel at home, doing everything they could," David says.

Andy was invited to a shrimp boil and a spaghetti dinner. His GCEC partner, Jason, prepared steak one night.

"They came to my community with their blood, sweat and tears and worked beside me," Jason says. "It was a mess,



**Ten-year-old Mason Gonzalez holds a sign offering water and thanking electric workers.**

Photo by Cathy Harpe

and they never complained even once.”

“It warms your heart,” says Andy. “We’re just doing what we do, helping people out. It makes you appreciate your job.”

Neighbors also are helping neighbors.

“People came together,” says Francis. “Looting and violence did not happen here. People didn’t try to steal what others had. They pulled together as family.”

GCEC employees put members first.

“They put power restoration ahead of tending to their homes,” says Cody

Gullatt, system control dispatcher for Peace River Electric Cooperative. “Some of them lost their homes and had to stay at the office with us because they had no home to go back to, but there was no way you would’ve known because they were completely dedicated to their jobs.”

Neighbors, friends and family united to clear roads of storm debris to allow the community to receive and give help.

“Tragedy has a way of bringing a community together,” John says. “Churches reached out with supplies, retired co-op employees offered their services to help bird-dog for mutual aid and contractors. Local grocery stores opened their damaged stores to us so we could access food and water to feed the first line crews arriving to help restore our system. Even in this tragedy, the generosity has been widespread and gracious.”

The rebuilding—both physical and emotional—will take many years.

The roof at Andy’s Florida Keys home is still awaiting repair from Irma damage.

Homeowners in the Panhandle are lining up to meet with insurance adjusters. Others have no insurance. As with Irma, contractors are in short supply.

Schools are on split schedules because some cannot be occupied. In February, the heavily damaged hospital will lay off 635 employees—almost half of its staff.

Panama City Mall will remain closed.

“It’s heartbreaking,” says Francis. “We have people in Panama City living in tent cities, cold, with no heat and no electricity. It is going to take years to rebuild. So much of Panama City is gone. Things we grew up with are gone. Every day we are working to make it better. It is depressing, but I will brag on this community. People are keeping their heads up.”

Those not connected to the community left in droves, but “people who are grounded and rooted here aren’t leaving,” Jason says.

“Time never heals,” he adds. “You are always going to have scars. But they will mend. Scars help you remember.”

John says it is easy to be discouraged by all of the destruction, “but we will not be discouraged. Our community is determined to come back better than ever.

“The face of this community has changed forever. Some things will never be the same. However, if we continue to unite together for the greater good of our community, just as we have done in the weeks since Hurricane Michael made landfall, we will be a stronger community.” ■

*Construction workers are desperately needed in the area, and dozens of relief organizations are accepting donations for hurricane victims. Want to help GCEC employees and their families? Send donations to the Line Workers Disaster Recovery Fund at P.O. Box 220, Wewahitchka, FL 32465.*