

13 Generation Peace Academy Hurricane Irma Relief Volunteers in Florida – Day 5

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On their fifth day in Florida, the International Relief Friendship Foundation (IRFF) volunteers split into two teams in order to maximize the amount they could help each person or family that needed their support. Below, a participant from each team recounts their experiences from another day of supporting those in need in LaBelle, while another participant delivers a moving testimony on his overall experience as an IRFF volunteer.

Nine of the IRFF volunteers had the opportunity to visit the household of a wonderful woman named Marie, who lived in an area just on the outskirts of LaBelle. Marie's friend had expressed to us her need for support and introduced us to her. She had her doubts that we would be able to help her with the damages she'd incurred from the storm, so she was reluctant to ask for help herself, but the team came to help out anyway, with willing and giving hearts, ready to do whatever they could to help.

A majority of the work consisted of clearing away debris such as large branches and a few fallen trees that had covered her property as a result of the strong hurricane winds. Though it was a seemingly a small job, it required the full dedication of each volunteer on site. Marie even came out and joined us, doing just as much as she could, just like the volunteers.

The volunteers worked in areas that were still flooded, with water coming up to their knees. We faced mosquitoes in the tall grass while rain continued to pour onto them. But nothing could stop them from helping Marie. We wouldn't stop working until they had done everything they could.

It was definitely a team effort but we were able to get it all done. All the hard work was worth it to see the smile and shining eyes of Marie when we gathered to depart once the job was done.

Before leaving, the group asked Marie for a comment on her overall experience and with a warm smile she stated, "All I can say is that I've been blessed. God has blessed me today....You guys were here when I needed you."

She showed a heart of gratitude and love toward each of us, giving us not only words of affirmation but also a box of snacks as a donation to the hardworking team. Marie strongly expressed her desire to continue connecting with the volunteers as they move forward in their storm-relief efforts and activities.

Contributed by M. Schlaepfer

Today, four people were able to go back to the home with the tree in their yard and help remove it. They were ready and prepared with their chainsaws to get the job done. Right at the start of the day they had troubles with the chainsaws. The team decided to go to Ace hardware to get them fixed. They went up to

the cashier with the chainsaws but the cashiers were so confused and could not help them. As they were leaving the store empty handed and with broken chainsaws, a man in front of them told them, “Go over the bridge and to the right of the golf cart store.”

If the team came even a minute earlier or later, they would not have met this man and found a place to fix the chainsaws. The team followed the directions of the man and went across the bridge and to the golf cart store. Here they were able to meet two hardworking men willing to help fix our chainsaws. The team was able to explain why they are in Florida providing service to communities. The two men were very moved and inspired by this that they fixed the chainsaws for free.

After this whole experience the team ended up going back to house and were able to clear up the tree with the fixed chainsaws. By the end of the day the whole team was able to see how God guided them in fulfilling their mission. They could have easily given up and left the tree because the chainsaws were broken. They persevered, however, and had determination to help this family.

Contributed by E. DiLorenzo



Reflection from Volunteer

Here’s what I knew going into Florida for disaster relief: it was going to be hard work. Because I didn’t really know what to expect, God was able to guide me even more.

On the first day I felt that the team wasn’t completely united because we didn’t really know what we were doing. Part of me felt kind of hopeless. I thought, “If we can’t even unite with each other, how are we supposed to help others?” But after our second attempt at Disaster Needs Assessment, a man we had previously met drove around to find us and tell us how proud he is, how people from all over the nation left their homes in order to live for another person, how we were doing our best to not forget a single person.

From his words of kindness I felt a new feeling of revitalization. I began to see that the work we are doing is much bigger than just my own feelings and even bigger than the physical effort that we put in. We were able to leave lasting impressions on people. Lasting feelings of hope that there is always going to be good people in the world and that God is always going to be working through them.

Florida was an amazing experience and every day, no matter how much work was put in, I felt like I could always do more. I always felt the urge to keep going and keep helping people no matter how tired I was. Even in the face of disaster, God is always going to find ways to give to you. If I was working off my own power to help these people I wouldn’t have felt the same sense of fulfillment. I wouldn’t have been able to keep working whether it was in the heavy rain or the scorching sun. But because my core was always God and True Parents, they were able to give me the strength to reach out and share True Parents’ love. —M. Cordero