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Five pounds of pre-formed steel swung in an arc above my head. Muscles down my back quivered with effort; the axe in my hands chewed the ground below my feet into gravel fit for any rock garden. I was digging through what our site leader called compact limestone, gravel and dust mixed by the light breezes characteristic of early morning combined with water from the last rainy season and dried by the same June sun baking every piece of skin exposed to its rays. Trenches ran from below four trailers placed on the left side of the main road into the park; twenty other trailers sat facing them across the dusty strip of land. Connecting the last four trailers to running water and sewer lines was one step in the process of making them ready for several families that would move into each three-bedroom, one-bath trailer.

I would count ten forceful swings that sent small pieces of rock flying and hand the pick to my friend Chris Anderson, who would then take ten swings and send entire rocks flying. At 215 pounds and able to bench press 345 pounds, he kept up with me. The five yard trench ran a foot deep and took us five hours to carve from the ground.

I was in Immokalee, Florida. The Southwest part of Florida has been hit by many hurricanes in the past four years: Charley, Francis, Ivan, Jeanne, Dennis, Henry, Wilma, and most widely recognized Katrina. In Florida, where Mickey and the sun reign supreme, where grandparents retire to rest their joints, there are people who have been devastated. Brightly colored single-wides painted pink and yellow and green decorated a dilapidated trailer park. Steaming tin roofs let in the sun and torrents of rain through gaping holes. Vehicles outside the homes showed little sign of misuse or maltreatment; the people cared lovingly for the only thing that would help their family to escape from the next hurricane: their car.

When the entire length of our trench had been dug out, we rested; the tongue of the nearest trailer in the shade was
our favorite spot. In the Florida sun we were carefully watched by our friends and supervisors alike, each drinking around two gallons of water a day. At the house where we were sleeping, we bought filtered water and drank it cold in the air-conditioned atmosphere. In the field, we drank sulfur, hot and stale. It was the best water I have ever had.

I learned how to improvise; our tool supply was limited. We were short on shovels so we used the claw ends of hammers to dig. I would go down the line we had to dig for timber placement and loosen the soil with a pick-axe for the crew handling hammers. I learned that the natural shape of a pickaxe is perfect for carving lines in the rock, but the amount of work Chris and I had done with our pickaxe bent it out of shape. The pick side had been bent beyond straight and was impossible to use; the blade side was useable for the other trenches we dug that day beneath the back of each of the four trailers in somewhat softer dirt. The next day our site leader showed up with a Cheshire grin; he had bought us two more brand new, shiny picks for the day's work.

One day I had the privilege of meeting the night security guard for the trailer park. The Hispanic man had come by in his sapphire blue Ford to see the crew putting the trailers together. While his wife sat in the front seat, not understanding a word we said, he explained to several of us how he and his very large dog sat in the park at night with a shotgun to protect the trailers from looters. Dishonest contractors had made copies of the door and padlock keys. Five trailers had been broken into; their microwaves and fridges, dining tables and mattresses, were stolen. Several of them had been completely stripped and would have to be refurnished before a family could move in.

The guard thanked us too many times to count during his story. We heard of people who gave up their time to provide wiring and plumbing services to install the trailers when they could have been working privately and earning a profit. One man was an electrician who lived in a shed on the foundation where his house used to be while he volunteered his time to fix other peoples’ homes. Even while we heard many stories like this one, there was a surprising amount of ignorance in the community about the damage that has yet to be repaired and the work that volunteers were doing to aid the residents.

Immokalee is the type of community where a person can drive down one street and see a brand new three-bedroom home with palm trees outside, then turn the corner into a trailer park full of single-wide trailers housing multiple families. “It’s been two years, yet dozens of families in Immokalee wait for Hurricane Wilma relief” (Miguel, “Two Years”). The $26,184 difference between the county average family income and Immokalee’s average family income was palpable (United States). The average working class citizen does not own or rent a house with a foundation and painted walls; he or she lives in a small rectangular tin box with holes punched in the ceiling by Hurricane Francis, part of a floorboard ripped out by Hurricane Jeanne, and water-damaged walls from the temper tantrums of Hurricane Wilma.

The damage that occurs is not the result of increased hurricane strength; the residents of the Gulf Coast cannot blame a swirling oceanic weather system for injury done to their homes. Hurricanes flooded land and knocked out trees way before contractors built houses on beach sand in Florida. It is simply that we, as a society, are building in places that are more vulnerable to natural disaster, and “it is along the nation's hurricane coasts where the increasing vulnerability is most apparent” (Cutter, “The U.S.”). Since 1970, the population of Collier County, which includes Immokalee, has grown more than 500 percent, a number that seems to explain why the housing density for the county was 71 units per square mile in Collier County in 2000 (United States). I suppose that statistic isn’t that shocking considering that in Fairview, Oregon, housing density is 972.9 units per square mile, but I saw what the average of 618 housing units per square mile in Immokalee means (United States). The people who live in these tin boxes step out of their front door into their neighbor’s backyard. Immokalee has fifteen percent more children than nearby Naples; they play in the dust and gravel instead of on manicured lawns under shady palm trees.

The hunger that Americans seem to have developed for living in the coastal regions has driven more people into harm’s way. This “demand for second homes - vacation or retirement-fueled development in the coastal counties and, with
improvements in access (such as interstate highways and bridges to barrier islands) and infrastructure (water, sewers, and electrical power), contributed to the current coastal crisis by exposing many more people and infrastructure to natural disasters than ever before” (Cutter, “The U.S.” 2).

One of the areas that most clearly exposes the change in demand for coastal dwelling is the housing market. In the last thirty years along the hurricane coast, including Florida, the median value of houses has doubled, and since housing costs are so high, more people are living in the only housing they can afford: mobile homes. (Cutter, “The U.S.” 3) This housing phenomenon is apparent in the example of Immokalee and Naples, two cities in the same county with vastly different economic standings. The median family income in Naples is $83,831 whereas the median family income in Immokalee is $22,628 (United States). An article in Environment explains it well: “There is a considerable geographic variability within each county; for example, the affluent might live right on the shoreline in beachfront property, but further inland there is a more diverse population (racially and economically)” (Cutter, “The U.S.” 3). Naples is on the coast and Immokalee is about twenty miles inland. These two cities and their populations are a perfect example of racial and economic difference.

The population make-up was present in the congregation of the Baptist church where we attended service one Sunday morning in Immokalee. We went to Sunday school with the high school kids and found out that their group is small not because they have trouble attracting people, but because as the population began to age, “there was a dramatic decrease in the percentage of children in the Hurricane coastal counties from 1970 to 2000” (Cutter, “The U.S.” 3). While the general population of children decreased there is a higher concentration of children in Immokalee. There is much evidence to show that “the two demographics groups most affected by disasters [are] children and the elderly,” which leaves Immokalee, with their many children and elderly, and the whole of Florida at a disadvantage (Cutter, “Social” 251). While I talked to adults and teenagers who lived in Immokalee, I found some prime examples of the aging population and the gap between the two demographic groups: children and the elderly.

Marla, one of my companions on this trip, was part of a crew that went out into the community to patch the roofs of mobile homes. Marla smiled constantly and was willing to let people talk to her. No matter where they lived, people knew she could be trusted based on the compassion present in her eyes and actions. One of the houses this team worked on was that of Beverly Frias. When the roof patching crew reached Raulerson Road and pulled into a dusty driveway, they steeled themselves to climb onto yet another hot metal sheet with the sun and its heat reflecting back at them. I am sure they laughed and joked as they worked, replacing their exhaustion with humor and reminding each other in the process that their effort was for God and the people they were helping.

Frias’ roof had “remained damaged since [Hurricane] Wilma and leak[ed] constantly into the bedroom, the bathroom, the kitchen and living and dining rooms” (Miguel, “Oregon” 1). At 54 years-old, Frias was an asthmatic living in a home with water damaged walls, stagnant water buckets under the drips, and she had no way to fund repairs to the home. This is the situation of many low-wage working class residents of Immokalee.

Each of the five days we worked we put in eight solid hours of sweating. We met at seven to beat the Florida sun, took a break at noon for an hour lunch, and paused for the day at three in the afternoon, no earlier. We would then load the pick-axes, hammers, screwdrivers, shovels, and circular saws into the secure padlocked and bolted trailer on the worksite. The house our group stayed at was next door to a Baptist church. The house's purpose was to provide a place to run their Sunday school program and to give lodging to volunteer groups. There were three showers that ran constantly from 3:15 to 4:00 in the afternoon. Once twenty sweaty bodies were through the showers and a few of the adults were back from housing elsewhere, there were usually jobs to do during our afternoon free time. Sort the laundry, help the kitchen crew with dinner, play card games, have the master masseuse of the group work on tired muscles.

On several occasions our group had the opportunity to go out into the community during our afternoon free time. On one such occasion I went with a group to the local grocery
It was a chain store, a Safeway, and every head turned as a group of very Caucasian teenagers walked through the sliding glass doors into a veritable sea of ethnicities. Not only is the community in Immokalee aging, growing, and earning low wages, it is also minimally white. No matter how much it is argued that there is now racial equality, the racial make-up of Immokalee puts the population at a disadvantage. In the whole of Collier County in 2005, the percentage of those classified as white was 92 percent. In the same census, Immokalee’s percentage of those classified as white was 38.5 percent. This stunning contrast shows the concentration of the Hispanic or Latino race, at 71 percent in Immokalee (United States). On each outing I had the opportunity to meet the inhabitants, wild life, or plain old plants that occupy Florida.

Another outing I had the opportunity to join in with the rest of group was an afternoon trek through Corkscrew Swamp. Under my feet was a path created out of wood, a several mile long bridge through the muck to keep visitors from going trekking through alligators and mud. The boards supporting me and the rails to my side were dotted with lichen a sky blue color. The two tones blended well together and were only interrupted by the occasional dark chocolate knot in the wood. My friends and I had the chance to see a prime example of the Everglades, and why people want to live in Florida. There were gargantuan spiders, hissing bugs, multicolored lizards, large locusts, and screeching birds. The foliage was oversized and green, but the pattern was broken every so often by a splash of white or red exploding from some species of vegetation.

This scene put into perspective, for me, why people are so attracted to Florida. It is truly a unique environment.

The last day I worked with my team in the trailer park was just as hot as the other four. The humidity threatened to weigh down our sore and tired arms and the lack of shade during the middle of the day seemed daunting. The very last step before the professional crew could come in and put skirting around the bottom of the trailers was to dig in landscaping timbers, for them to attach the plastic sheets that would hide the plumbing, just inside the rain line below the trailers. Digging under the edge was a challenge when there were only a couple shovels to be found and the long handles made the work tedious and frustrating. To keep our lines level and straight a crew sunk stakes at the four corners of each trailer and string was looped around each to create a rectangle. I then went around the trailers with my pick axe and loosened the compacted limestone for the crews of diggers that followed me at a safe distance. Using the claw ends of our large supply of hammers each crew sunk about nine eight-foot timbers around every trailer. The holes that ran the perimeter of the trailer were about five inches wide and four inches deep. Once all the timbers were set, shorter pieces were crudely measured and cut to fill small gaps in the corners. We had no table or saw horses to use so we improvised. The wood was placed on top of the triangular metal tongue of a trailer and the two ends hung over the sides. Someone cut with the saw on one end and a second person sat on the other to stabilize the piece of wood. Once all of the gaps were filled and the timbers leveled, sand was filled in around them and the string taken on to the next trailer where the process started all over again.

One week after my team was there, a crew was scheduled to come put the skirting on the trailers. Once that was completed, the inspectors could come and clear each trailer so the families could move in. I can imagine exactly the way that the home is set up in those trailers. Up the makeshift ladder and over the threshold, to the right are two bedrooms, to the left the great room which is a kitchen, a living room and a dining room all combined into one. Beyond this to the left is the one bathroom and the master suite. The master bedroom is slightly larger than the other two and has a bigger window. Each room contains a metal bed frame, box spring, mattress, two small end tables, a bureau, and blinds on the windows. The living/dining room is decorated with a dark walnut dining table and six chairs topped with white cushions still covered in plastic. In the living room portion, there is a small oval coffee table and two skinny square couch tables in matching stains. The sofa color is called golden nugget on the tags that include the dreaded “do not remove” warning. The microwave, range, and refrigerator are all white; we even assembled the inside shelves in preparation for groceries to feed families of six.

These families, the ones who live in the FEMA trailers
my team assembled, have been directly affected by our action. The physical motion of swinging a pick axe is something I will never forget. The looks on the faces of Immokalee residents as they walked into church on that Sunday morning faced by a group of teenagers clad in neon green t-shirts that said “Disaster Relief” will be forever emblazoned in my memory. While “the Federal Government [was] doing everything [they could] to help” we were finishing the trailers that were supposed to be done months earlier (Bush 1). Something must be done for the residents of communities so small they don’t show up on the national radar for disaster assistance. This is a cry out for all those who can’t get the message across themselves: Help us.

Works Cited


