

Hospitality Industry Shows Resilience, Compassion in the Wake of Helene, Milton

By Sean Doherty

While our community is no stranger to weather emergencies and other external challenges, the recent one-two punch our destination took from hurricanes Helene and Milton was unprecedented. But with every disaster or difficult circumstance, there's a silver lining. I arrived in Charlotte County in April 2005 just months following Hurricane Charley's visit and witnessed the revitalization and strengthening of a community. This rebirth not only included the replacement of the old Memorial Auditorium with the Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center (a bigger and better venue to serve the growing community) but also three new modern hotels, several restaurants, a park, marina, and other amenities. In addition, the civic non-profit organization, TEAM Punta Gorda, was born and continues to serve the city well in a variety of ways two decades later.

What positive improvements may come to Charlotte County as a result of Helene and Milton is yet to be seen, however, something much more important than bricks and mortar were part of this silver lining. While it's always gratifying to see individuals selflessly come together in these types of situations to help their neighbors, this time seemed even better. From Sunseeker Resort providing more than 1,000 hot meals to those in need and loaning more than 130 bed sheets for one of the shelters to the large number of volunteers who came out to help the Peace River Botanical & Sculpture Gardens clear debris and prep the facility to reopen, businesses and individuals reacted quickly to assist even when they were facing their own personal challenges. Even musicians, such as Cage O'Hanlon, got into the act playing for free and only accepting tips, 100% of which went towards helping the staff of the Celtic Ray.

As you may know, Manasota Key took the hardest hit of all, which caused significant damage to residences, vacation rentals and other lodging properties, as well as restaurants and a number of hospitality businesses on the island. Three of those restaurants, Lock N Key, SandBar Tiki and Grille and Magnolia's on the Bay are all part of the Manasota Key Group, which employs hundreds of staff members. Without hesitation, one of their competitors, Farlow's on the Water, which was dealing with their own recovery issues, took it upon themselves to create a specialty drink called Englewood Strong, and donated 100% of the revenues to help the out-of-work staff of those restaurants. And what made it even better is that The Twisted Fork picked up on it and offered to do the same. As of this writing, I believe the effort was very close to approaching its \$100,000 goal.

Speaking of Englewood, the Englewood Chamber of Commerce initiated a hurricane relief donation campaign and instituted an application process on their website for individuals and businesses affected by the storms. This fund included over \$150,000 raised from individuals, businesses and organizations, including \$88,000 from the Lighthouse United Methodist Church on Boca Grande.

Of course, the storms' effects were also felt on the opposite side of the county, particularly in the downtown Punta Gorda area, where flooding is frequently the challenge during events like this. Showing impressive resilience, business owners and their dedicated staff rolled up their sleeves to clean out the debris and muck left by the storms, and for some, it was a repeat of the exercise they had just gone through the week prior. In the midst of all this, I saw a TV interview where the owner of Leroy's Southern Kitchen was interviewed about the damage his business

received and his clean-up efforts. Near the end of the segment, he showed a similar scene next door inside Isabel & Annabel's and said he planned to start cleaning there next to help give his friend and competitor, who had not made it back to town, a head start. Isabel and Annabel has since reopened. This simple act really embodied the spirit of resilience and compassion our community possesses and will help us weather any type of storm or other potential challenge in the future and makes me proud to be a Charlotte County citizen.

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