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Wanted in San Leon: Residents

Fishing town's natives say they're the forgotten disaster in Galveston County, but that's not stopping the eclectic bunch from getting things done

By SUSAN CARROLL
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Sharon Steinmann Chronicle

Ryan Wallace picks up food, water and ice from the Texas Army National Guard for his grandmother who lives in San Leon.

SAN LEON — Community leaders in this little fishing and resort town, beaten and broken by Hurricane Ike, have a very different philosophy about rebuilding than some of their coastal neighbors.

"The consensus in the community is that if you're not a thief, and you're not lazy or elderly or infirm — and you're not dragging a bunch of kids around — then you should get back to San Leon and help us fix it up," said James "Gator" Miller, 48, the publisher of the local newspaper, The Seabreeze News, and a former honorary mayor.

While Galveston and other coastal communities have urged residents to stay away, the leadership of this town of 4,200 that juts out into Galveston Bay are telling able-bodied men and women to get home and clean up the town, home to an eclectic collection of blue-collar shrimpers and fishermen, beach bums and retirees.

"The gut feeling here," Miller said on Friday as he struggled to put out a newspaper in neighboring Dickinson, "is that we're not going to wait for help, and we're not going to beg for it."

San Leon boasts no local government (except for an honorary mayor, elected at the annual Where in the Hell is San Leon festival each April). The town has zero big-box stores, thrives on fishing and shrimping and proudly claims to have the largest golf-cart parade in Texas.

The hurricane rolled over this town last week and took with it people's livelihoods, their boats, their businesses and swamped much of the town from the Yellow Brick Road (seriously) to April Fools Point, in a thick sludge.

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Ike lifted 76-year-old Jim Devine off his second-story porch and left him, lifeless, about a block or two away. His family had urged him to leave, but "he was a very stubborn man, and he loved it there," said his daughter, Anne Devine Massicott, 47, of Clear Lake.

Devine's next-door neighbors, Billie Reuter, 80, and her husband, Christopher Jacob Reuter, 81, said they were sorry for the Devine family's loss as they worked to repair their 1940s-era home on the bay.

Christopher adjusted his suspenders and dug under debris looking for a salvageable waterline.

The only way into the home, which lost much of its underpinnings as a neighbor's boat beat against the wooden posts during the storm, was by climbing a metal ladder.

Billie was confident they would rebuild with a little help from their son, an electrician. "You just don't know that man," she said, gesturing to her husband of 60 years. "He's a worker. A great worker."

Maintaining humor

For a town with such severe devastation, it maintains a sense of humor.

One couple used red spray paint to write FEMA YARD OF THE MONTH on the side of their damaged wooden cottage. Some had more stern warnings: Loot on this street, die on this street.

"We are the outlaws of Galveston County," said Scott Lyons, the assistant chief for the town's volunteer fire department, driving past a home with a fake coffin in the front yard and a sign that said: Looter Vacancy.

Lyons, 31, is also the town's unofficial honorary mayor. In between emergency calls, he grumbled about Galveston County's response to the destruction in San Leon. He said about 65 percent of the town of 4,200 stayed in San Leon during the storm, but many are still missing.

He's been unable to reach emergency response officials from Galveston County consistently by phone, and he finally drove up there on Wednesday to request, in person, a rescue and recovery team qualified to wade through debris looking for bodies.

He said he was told there were no generators available for his volunteer fire department, even though the Galveston animal shelter had some. "I love dogs. Love them. I have two," he said. "But we're first-responders."

A reporter was unable to reach anyone with Galveston emergency management on Friday to get a response to complaints from San Leon.

By Friday, volunteer firefighters from throughout Texas were on hand to search for bodies, and National Guardsmen passed out food, water and ice.

Lyons said his volunteer fire crew of 15 went door-to-door shortly after the storm and found four bodies, including Devine, whose daughter had spray-painted "MISSING!" on his peach-colored home by the bay, along with her phone number.

The town managed to organize basic aid for residents after the storm and made sure no one went hungry. The Red Cross responded quickly, and the local Lions Club brought in three 18-wheelers of food.

Casper's Billiards, a metal-walled, two-story bar by the bay, survived with minimal damage compared with the rest of the town. Cook Roderick Lara served everything in the cooler Sunday night — 170 burger patties, 60 pounds of sausage and 30 pounds of chicken — to anyone looking for a warm meal.

Casper's owner, 63-year-old Roy Robinson, said it was the least he could do.

"There was some lady in her 70s that came up here with a plastic bag, all she had left to her name," Robinson said. "It just made me want to cry."

Setting an example

Miller, the newspaper publisher, grew up in Seabrook and lived in Kemah as a teenager. He used to ride his bicycle down to San Leon to go fishing as a kid. After six years in the Navy and a stint as a reporter and then as a bounty hunter, he opened a printing shop in San Leon 21 years ago and now publishes the town's newspaper, edited by a blind man who lost his home in the storm.

He told the editor, who recently had quadruple bypass surgery, to stay away until the town is a little better. Miller also told the same thing to his elderly Aunt Vera, he said, since she's pushing 80.

But most everybody who's able-bodied, and not working somewhere else, should come home, he said. Lyons tried to get a 72-year-old woman who had pitched a tent on the slab of her home to go to a shelter, but all she would accept was a neighbor's generator to run a little fan.

"We want to kind of let it be an example to other towns that are heartbroken about the devastation," he said. "When you leave a place for five or six months, and your home is gone, and your job is gone, you don't come back. You're gone, and we like our people. We don't want them to go away forever."

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