

The little island ...that could

The morning after

Tough times bring out the best in island residents

by Andrea Milam

All photographs by Anne Bequette



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Even on a good day, living on a small island can be challenging. On St. John, residents have learned to approach problems with creativity and ingenuity, and above all else, we rely on each other. In the wake of Hurricane Irma, the need to come together was even more pronounced. For many of us who were here during the storm and its aftermath, it's these heartening memories of the way we helped one another that eclipsed the fear and loss we experienced.



*St. John chic:
Bikini and chainsaw*

It started days before Irma's direct hit on the island, when people residing in wooden structures were advised to seek shelter elsewhere. Amy Isenbek and her family, who had moved to St. John less than a year prior, readied their wooden house, politely declining repeated invitations from friends to ride out the storm at their concrete home. The day Irma was upgraded from a Category 4 to a 5, Amy relented, realizing that they would in fact be safest at their friends'.

"To be offered shelter by friends we had known less than a year seemed like just another day on St. John," Amy says. "It's just what people on this little island do—they look out for one another. This was a huge offer and they seemed genuinely relieved when we finally accepted. We felt cared for, accepted, and loved."

On September 5th, Hurricane Irma roared across our island. The storm's winds, recorded at the Westin Resort, were at 220 miles per hour sustained, with 274-mile-per-hour gusts before the location's anemometer broke.

As soon as winds died down, residents came out of their homes.

Some came armed with chainsaws, cutting away downed utility poles to make roads passable. Others climbed over fallen trees and through debris to check on loved ones.

Leah Randall Hanson was one of the residents who set out on foot the morning after Irma. She and four others, all boat owners, who rode out the storm in a home on Bordeaux Mountain were anxious to see how their vessels fared. What should have been an hour-long walk to Coral Bay took more than four hours, their journey slowed in part by the overwhelming need to hug every person whose path they crossed.

"It was a joyous meeting with every person we saw," Leah says. "We were so happy to see everyone."

As Leah and her crew traversed Centerline Road on foot, they stopped in the Mamey Peak area to hail up to Tom and Lori Buttermore, who had sheltered there in their home. Tom and Lori realized it would take days of heavy chainsaw work for them to be able to exit their neighborhood, and they wanted to get the word out to their families stateside that they were safe.



Brothers in arms

“Leah said they were heading to Coral Bay, where they had heard there was a satellite phone,” Lori says. “We wrote our families’ names and phone numbers on a plastic water bottle and hoisted it down the hill. That night, our families learned that we had made it through the storm.”

The St. John community worked together to prioritize necessities and one of the more urgent things to be accomplished was the evacuation of residents in need of medical care. Love City Strong Director Meaghan Enright says she was made aware of a ship full of supplies that was on its way to St. John and able to evacuate residents to Fajardo in Puerto Rico.

“That kicked us into high gear trying to fill the boat with priority evacuees, like a friend of ours who was due to have a baby any day, and anyone with a medical issue that couldn’t be managed here,” Meaghan says. “For the next 10 days, we coordinated the delivery of a ton of supplies and the evacuation of 1,200 people to St. Croix and Puerto Rico.”

Once everyone on island had been accounted for and those in need of medical care had been evacuated, the island adopted a new sort of rhythm. Remember, there was still very little communication with the outside world. Daily community meetings at

Mongoose Junction helped spread vital information. Residents took trips to town to climb to the third-floor balcony at Boulon Center, the only place on island to get a cell signal, to update family and friends. They stopped by the restaurants giving out free meals, pausing along the way to embrace one another, whether casual acquaintance or long-time friend. They delivered food and supplies to neighbors, helped one another with generator repair, and never let a conversation pass without asking, “What do you need? How can I help?”

“We were in a post-apocalyptic environment, doing what we’ve always done—taking care of each other,” says Leah.

Though Amy Isenbek’s family’s home was lost to the storm, it was these post-Irma experiences that cemented their decision to stay on St. John.

“It was the time after storms when the community came together for the good of the people

that we knew for sure this is where we wanted to live,” Amy says. “Despite our island looking like a war zone, we had friends here who wanted us to be safe, who worried about us, who looked out for us, and who treated us like family. Despite having nothing, we still had so much.”

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Long lines



Starting from the ground up



Kenny Chesney’s Love for Love City is on the job



New friends