

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Letter To The Editor | Irmaversary Reflections

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This year. 2017, 2018, whenever Irma happened.... It has a different definition for everyone. For some, ringing in the new year in January was a new start. For others, it would take nine more months to truly relieve the weight of another trip around the sun. For more still, the week that is upon us now is not a celebratory one. It is a week of reflection. Of contemplation. Of review. Where are we now? Where were we then? How far have we come? How much further is it to get "there?" I had a conversation with my most important "Irma Buddy" as we commemorated the one-year anniversary of our time together watching Irma approaching, not here at home on St. John, but from afar. For her, this year flew by in an instant. She had to keep her head above water after returning home. She had to keep going. Keep pushing to some kind of normal.

For me, this was the longest year ever. I feel like I was 15 years younger on that long ago day in Del Ray Beach, watching the “superstorm” move towards that non-descriptive dot that I knew to be my great big world. I looked at my friend and I said, “You may not feel like time has gone by, but I have seen you grow. I have seen you take on new roles and step in where you were needed. I have seen you overcome the worst and be even better on the other side.” Thus encapsulating my year since Irma on St. John amidst this resilient community of truly amazing people.

I am the Director of Operations for the STJ Angels - Long Term Recovery Team (LTRT). My experience in hurricane response, relief, and recovery does not warrant me that title. I was a bartender before all of this. I was a pretty well educated, over-achieving bartender...but still just a bartender. Like many others after the storms, I went searching for a way I could make a difference. To push through. I asked someone [Celia Kalousek, Executive Director of the St. John Community Foundation] to give me the opportunity to do a thing [join the StJ Angels - LTRT staff to help drive the recovery effort] and they did. So I did. And I do.

The organization I work for is primarily made up of volunteers. Most Long Term Recovery Teams are. Yes, we have a staff for the functional day-to-day; pushing programs, fundraisers, and operations forward, but we are fueled by little more than the desire to keep St. John moving in the right direction. Onward and upward and better than even before.

Maybe it's because I've never worked in a disaster zone before. Maybe it's because I've never had to watch people pick up the pieces of their lives, or reach out for help to do so. Maybe it's because I don't know what the proverbial “long road to recovery” looks like in other settings. But, I can tell you, here it's a lot like that song the Grateful Dead once sang, “don't tell me this town ain't got no heart....”

I have watched people suffer, people grow, and people grow from their suffering. I have witnessed office squabbles escalate to screaming matches over the state of road maintenance. I have watch entire rebuild programs develop from notes on a meeting agenda, and sustainable communication devices come to fruition over months of community meetings. I have witnessed blood, sweat, and tears (and also yielded all of them) go into these recovery and resiliency efforts by die-hard St. Johnians, both employees of nonprofits and volunteers with nothing more on their agenda than pushing forward to get back to better than we were before.

Throughout this whole journey, we have been accompanied by members of FEMA, rescue and relief organizations, university intellectuals, and high level executives... All who have the same message to pass along, “we have never seen a community like this before.” From heart wrenching farewell speeches at those early morning community meetings to the day-to-day dropins at the office. There is one message that remains the same. WE, as a community, are doing things a bit differently than they have been done before. We Are doing everything it takes to develop both ourselves and our island. WE are taking things in our own hands and putting our own systems in place to move forward in response, recovery, and resiliency efforts. WE are taking care of each other and ourselves.

The synonymous message brought forth by these individuals who have also become a part of both our recovery efforts and our community is this: The road to recovery is long and treacherous. But, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. It shines bright within each and every one of you who works tirelessly to make a difference on this little rock in the middle of the ocean that makes things so difficult and so beautiful all at the same time. I have never in my life been more proud to be a part of something as I am with you; this community of go getters, day dreamers and misfits. One day, we'll look back at these moments in time and realize we made it though.

Submitted on Wednesday by: *Hillary Bonner, director of operations for STJ Angels-Long Term Recovery Team.*

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