

The Town That Wouldn't Die

After Hurricane Ike receded, leaving most of our homes and businesses in ruins, a distraught and disheveled Galveston Mayor Lyda Thomas appeared on television telling those who had evacuated to please not return. The following day, in a state of seeming catatonic panic, she told those remaining on the Island to “just leave”. In every community where there was widespread devastation, the “authorities” asked the evacuees to stay away, and even recommended that those who had stayed ought to vamoose as well. FEMA offered hotel vouchers to lure them away.

This occurred in every place except one – San Leon Texas. In San Leon, we do not have a lot of community leaders and very little in the way of authorities. The ones we do have are well-aware that the hardheaded folks in this tiny dot on the map are not accustomed to being herded around like sheep.

That explains why only 10-15% of San Leon evacuated ahead of the storm. No town along the coast came close to San Leon in the percentage of residents who stayed.

The media ridiculed and castigated those who remained, but the folks in San Leon have roots in the sea, and were prepared to survive. Only one person in San Leon died in the storm, 71 year-old Jim Devine. Most folks here know how to prepare for and survive a hurricane.

Once the storm was over, San Leon again distinguished itself from our neighbors by taking a reverse stand regarding what residents ought to do. The community – without a hand-wringing Mayor to discredit their courage – went straight to work.

Before the last winds of Ike had died down, people were already pulling debris out of the streets to make way for vehicles to pass. They were searching and asking to make sure their neighbors had made it okay. They were sharing food and supplies with each other.

Constable Matranga, Mayor Scott Lyons, MUD President Joe Manchaca, editor Steve Hoyland Sr., and publisher Gator Miller were already urging the opposite of what other communities were saying. They urged San Leon residents to get to work, and urged all honest, able-bodied citizens who had evacuated to come home and get to work recovering and rebuilding. “It is their duty as good citizens to come home and get to work” Miller said to a Chronicle reporter. “We can use all the honest help we can get” Matranga said.

A relief volunteer from Mississippi said that she was thrilled to see the attitude here. “It reminds me of the Bible story of Nehemiah, where they worked with tools in one hand and spears in the other to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem” she said, with tears shining in her eyes. “These people have a lot of heart.”

That independent self-reliant attitude is a large part of what has made sunny San Leon such an interesting place to live, and it is the attitude that will rebuild our community.

There will be help from friends and neighbors. FEMA and the State will toss a few dollars in. Insurance will cover some of the damages. But the brunt of restoring San Leon will be on the backs of the people who live here.

We can not expect the government or any other agencies to reconstruct our idyllic tropical paradox – it is a responsibility each of us must take on personally.

Our town looks like hell right now. But all of the signs are pointing to a full recovery. We all knew our neighbors pretty well before the storm, but Ike has cemented a lot of friendship and community spirit in San Leon.

The Seabreeze just wants to say how much we cherish the stubborn hard-headed people of San Leon.



Sign in front of Radio City proclaims the victory of survival



House that landed intact directly in the center of an intersection on 10th Street



Texas City Dike – demolished