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OP-ED

Helene left me stranded in North Carolina. In the midst of tragedy, I found community.



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The French Broad River breaks its banks in Asheville on Friday, Sept. 27, 2024 as the remnants of Hurricane Helene caused flooding, downed trees, and power outages in western North Carolina. TRAVIS LONG tlong@newsobserver.com



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I was supposed to spend last weekend with my best friends from college, celebrating a decade since we'd met. Hurricane Helene had different ideas, and we never made it to the beach.

Instead, three of us ended up in Western North Carolina, in one of the hardest-hit areas by the storm.

TOP VIDEOS

Why did we attempt to drive from Kentucky to the beach when bad weather was on the way? Why did we follow total strangers to places without power and cell service?

Each of us have had a difficult year — there has been a lot of grief and major health problems and life changes, and we needed each other. On Friday morning, my friends Katelyn, Rachel and I set out for Savannah. I had been tracking the hurricane, and it seemed like the worst of the weather would miss Savannah. Our friend Lindsey, who lives in New York, would get on a flight to meet us there.

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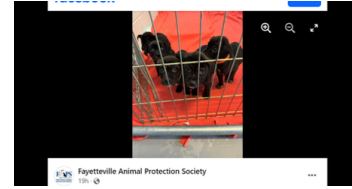




See photos and video from Helene's devastation in the mountains of western NC



Western North Carolina communities hope for 'some sort of lifeline' after Helene damage




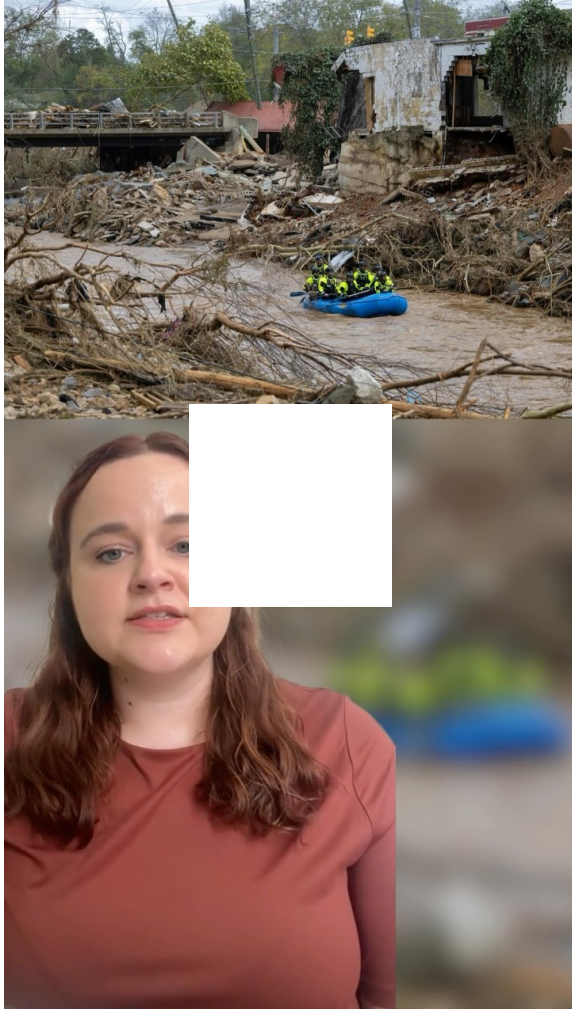
'Please do not think poorly of me.' Heartbreaking note found with puppies at NC shelter damage

We made it through Asheville, to Fletcher, N.C., before we realized how bad things were. Interstates 40 and 26 [were flooded](#), so we got routed back to Asheville.

Asheville was completely devastated. The French Broad River had flooded, trees and power lines were down, and we [couldn't get cell service](#).

Eventually, we found a route that we thought would take us closer to Savannah, through Black Mountain, because we were still delusional enough to think that we were making it to the beach.

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Lexington Herald-Leader reporter Monica Kast was one of thousands who was stranded in Western North Carolina because of Hurricane Helene. Here's what she experienced. [#hurricane](#) [#helene](#) [#wnc](#) [#blackmountain](#)

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But once we got to Black Mountain, it became clear that we couldn't go anywhere. A local stopped our car, called us "flatlanders" and told us the only option was to find high ground to park our car and stay put for the night. That man likely saved our lives, as we later learned the road we'd been trying to access no longer existed.

We made our way to the local police and fire station, where a police officer directed us to Black Mountain Presbyterian Church across the street. We could park there for the night and sleep in our car, he said.

We pulled out the only warm clothes we'd packed, which was just sweatshirts and beach towels, and settled in for the night. We found a bucket, which became our bathroom, and took stock of the road trip snacks that would be our dinner.

The sun rises in Black Mountain, North Carolina after Hurricane Helene brought rainfall and flooding to the area. Herald-Leader reporter Monica Kast, along with two friends, were stranded in the town over the weekend. Provided by Rachel McClain Wiley

And while you might not want to take advice from me, because of the whole “very avoidable, getting stranded on a mountain during a hurricane” thing, at least hear me when I say this — if you're going to get stranded, you should do it with your best friends.

Even though things were bad, we found ways to laugh and catch up on how insane life had been since we were last together. We cried together and did our best to take care of one another, even though all we'd packed was sandals, a few snacks and, by some miracle, a pack of bottled water. We talked about how we were tired of living through historic events.

Rachel's phone was the only one getting cell service, and it was spotty at best, so we tried to make contact with family and friends to let them know where we were.

The next morning, we woke up and naively thought there might be a way for us to

make our way home.

A short walk back over to the police station and we met dozens of other people who were in the same situation. Police and firefighters told us there was no way in or out of Black Mountain, and likely wouldn't be for a few days. We realized that we didn't have enough gas to get somewhere with an operational gas station. In Black Mountain, bridges had been washed away, roads were impassable, and nowhere in the town had water or electricity.

I've been a journalist for nearly a decade, so I've covered natural disasters and flooding before, but nothing like this. I don't have the words to describe it, other than to say it's the worst thing I've ever seen.

Roads were underwater, and what wasn't flooded was covered in a thick layer of mud from flooding the day before. Trees and power lines were down. Nowhere in town had electricity, gas or running water. First responders were still performing rescue missions. FEMA was trying to get to town with supplies, but we'd heard they couldn't because there were no safe places to land helicopters.

It felt like we were living in the apocalypse. When I finally managed to get in touch with my parents on Saturday evening, all I could keep repeating was, "It's so bad. Everything is so bad."

But amidst all that, we began to meet the kind people of Black Mountain. As much as the destruction will stay with me, the kindness of total strangers will stay with me too.

HEROES EVERYWHERE

White Horse Black Mountain, a music venue in Black Mountain, North Carolina, displays a sign after Hurricane Helene hit the area. Herald-Leader reporter Monica Kast, along with two friends, were stranded in the town over the weekend. Provided by Rachel McClain Wiley

We met a pastor, Daryl, whose church didn't have any working amenities but told us we could stay in the church gym as long as we needed. Daryl pulled water from the creek behind the church so we could flush the toilet. The local music venue opened their doors with a "pay what you can" option. When we confessed that we didn't have a way to pay, they told us to stay anyway.

We met Amy and David at the Presbyterian church where we'd camped out the night before, who offered us water and snacks, and served us the first full meal we'd had in more than 24 hours.

As we were sitting in the dark venue, my friend Rachel managed to get a call from her mother-in-law. A friend of her friend was waiting to pick us up in the police station parking lot.

We met John McFerrin, who is truly the hero of this story. After talking for a few minutes (I had a lot of questions to make sure that we weren't about to get kidnapped or murdered), John brought us to his house just a few blocks away.

We met his son, and learned that John and his neighbors had been prepping for a natural disaster like this, so they had camping supplies. We met their neighbors, who had figured out a way to filter pool water into drinking water.

I cried after we got there, because I was just happy to have a roof over my head and a bed to sleep in.

The next morning, we started helping out where we could. We added what was left of our road trip snacks to the neighborhood stash, and raked leaves and sticks out of the yard. John helped us get hiking boots and warm clothes from the store he owns in town. We joined him as he made rounds checking on friends after the storm, which is where we met Becca, another hero in this story.

Becca mentioned that she was going to try to make it to her parents' house in Ohio the next day. We had met only five minutes before, but we asked if we could come with her, and she agreed to take us to Charlotte.

So on Sunday, we began plotting our course home. Interstate 40 was expected to

have one lane East open — I-40 West remains closed, and will be for the foreseeable future. We would leave our car in Black Mountain, Becca would bring us to Charlotte, where Katelyn's husband would meet us, and we would fly home.

Flooding along Interstate 40 eventually closed down the road for several days. Herald-Leader reporter Monica Kast, along with two friends, were stranded in the town over the weekend. Monica Kast mkast@herald-leader.com

On Sunday night, I saw the community of Black Mountain come together again, as John's neighbors gathered together with the food that was about to spoil and had a massive cookout. Even with all the uncertainty and destruction around us, there was joy as everyone realized how lucky we were to have survived.

There was a lot of talk about how long the road to recovery would be, too. But we also talked about our favorite movies, and found common ground in our very different lives.

John and his neighbors took us in without a second thought, making sure we had plenty to eat. The only thing they asked for in return was that we helped rake the yard. He reminded us to not let ourselves get dehydrated, and when my friend voiced concern about running out of medicine she needed to take daily, John walked us to a doctor he knew to see if any pharmacies were operating.

People had been checking on their neighbors, and contributing what they could or helping out wherever possible. Total strangers were looking out for us, three women they found in a police department parking lot.

When we asked John if there was a way we could repay him for everything he'd done, he just asked us to "Pay it forward someday."

HELP IF YOU CAN

On Monday morning, we loaded up in Becca's car with her dog JoJo, and made it to Charlotte. The rest of the story is pretty boring — we made our flight out of Charlotte, made it to Louisville, and my sister picked me up from the airport.

What I experienced was the worst thing I've had to live through, mentally and physically. I'm lucky that I had so many people looking out for me, and I'm overwhelmed when I think about how many people have reached out in recent days, and how many people were working behind the scenes to try and get us to safety. I'm grateful for everyone who has checked in with me in recent days, offering a hug or a meal or a listening ear. I'm still in shock about everything I saw.

But there are people who have it so much worse. I'm privileged to have made it home safely, to my apartment that has electricity, running water and food.

The people affected by the storm will go weeks without these things, if not longer. [More than 130 people have died](#) because of Helene, [12 of them from Black Mountain](#), with that number expected to continue to rise. Landslides and flooding have closed major highways, making it difficult to get needed supplies to people or for those who have been displaced to make a journey to anywhere else.

If you're able, I encourage you to find a way to donate to those affected by Helene. Western North Carolina was hit hard, but many other areas need help too. People need water, food and support in ways that we cannot even imagine.

There are plenty of options to consider, but those focused on North Carolina include [BeLoved Asheville](#), [World Central Kitchen](#), and [Rural Organizing and Resilience \(ROAR\)](#). There's also the [North Carolina Disaster Relief Fund](#).

In the times after a disaster, I often see the quote from Mr. Rogers circulating: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" If there's a way you can be one of those helpers, please do.

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