

# HURRICANE IAN - One Year Later

## An uncertain beginning, an unthinkable ending

■ BY MARCY SHORTUSE

On the morning of Wednesday, Sept. 27 the staff at the Boca Beacon realized that trying to put a newspaper together the next day might be a pipe dream. It's difficult, though, to write about something that might leave us alone totally or clobber us completely.

"It's difficult to tell a story without knowing the ending," is exactly what we wrote. "That's where we are at as of Wednesday morning, waiting for Hurricane Ian to come ashore. Where? Of course, we don't know right now."

Living in coastal Florida during hurricane season can be downright annoying. How many times had we put up the storm shutters, spent more money than we should on food and bottled water, canceled plans and "hunkered down" to wait for a hurricane ... only to have it miss us completely or weaken to the point it wasn't much more than a regular storm?

If you've ever heard of "hurricane parties" but didn't know why people would be that crazy, it's because you get hardened to the fact it could actually happen here. "The Big One," that is. A lot of people just give up on caring and decide to make a nice time of it.

With this particular storm we had already been told it would hit the Panhandle, then somewhere north of Tampa, then somewhere "between Venice and Sanibel." That's where we were at Wednesday morning, wondering if all the mandatory evacuations and the great wailing and gnashing of teeth by meteorologists was going to be worth it.

There are two barometers by which a seasoned Floridian judges that a hurricane might actually be a problem for them – if Jim Cantore shows up and/or the Waffle House closest to them closes. Cantore checked into a Punta Gorda hotel Tuesday morning at 11 a.m. and the Waffle House in Punta Gorda closed Tuesday night.

Then the Boca Grande Fire Department announced they would be taking their trucks and equipment to North Port Tuesday night. The Gasparilla Island Bridge Authority closed down the toll booths and opened the gates. Boca Grande was entirely devoid of people Tuesday afternoon, other than fire department personnel and less than a handful of residents. No cars

were on the road. No stores were open ... not one.

If you went down to the beach access streets Tuesday afternoon you would have seen a strange thing: The water was being sucked out. You could see the current moving swiftly out, and you could see a very large portion of the sand that is normally covered with water. Another unique sight was a line of trucks parked along Gasparilla Road by the Johann Fust Library. They were storm researchers from the University of Florida and their trucks had trailers containing large, folded towers. One truck had a trailer with a very impressive four-wheeler and beach bikes. We asked one of the researchers what was going on. He said they came to the island to put the towers up in various locations to monitor and research "hurricane force winds."

"If you're somewhere where you see us, you don't want to be there," he said.

"So, we're getting those hurricane force winds, huh?" we asked.

He looked at grim as he said, "Oh, yeah. I wouldn't want to be out here tomorrow at noon."

### Monitoring the approaching storm

There are two ways to monitor the weather systems on Gasparilla Island: the Boca Beacon Facebook page and the GICIA email updates that GICIA Executive Director Misty Nichols puts out. You can also get the Boca Grande Fire Department app on your phone, but when things get crazy Chief Blosser doesn't always have time to put out hourly updates.

This system that turned into a monster started out as just another blip on the weather radar during a very active period in the Atlantic and the Gulf. Tropical Depression 7 was being monitored off the coast of Africa on September 14. The GICIA sent out their first bulletin mentioning Ian.

On September 19 at 5 p.m., the Hurricane Tracker App Team was the source from which Misty picked up on some rather unfortunate news about a tropical wave in the central Atlantic. She sent out her second bulletin that read, "There's currently a 20 percent chance of development and we expect that to increase over the coming days. Unfortunately, model agreement is very high concerning this next system. The latest forecast models show the system tracking through the Ca-



ribbean during the next five to seven days and possibly reaching the Gulf of Mexico in about seven to 10 days ..."

On the morning of September 20, a new bulletin was issued by the GICIA, this time with weather information from former Charlotte County FEMA Director Wayne Sallade.

"This disturbance is now Invest 98L and it's given a 50 percent chance to develop by this weekend in the Caribbean ... one group of models want to bring the system over or near Florida in a week or so. That being said, until Air Force and NOAA recon flights begin, we won't have solid data to input for the hurricane models to chew on. Let's be patient and not get our shorts in a twist."

It appeared in the next few days that, while forecasters still weren't sure what this storm was going to do, the words "cone of uncertainty" were being increasingly used. Others were telling us to make sure our hurricane kits were up to par, but not to begin listening to the "doomsday" forecasts. All the while, the storm that became known as Ian during that week was ever-strengthening.

By September 25 at 8 a.m. the GICIA gave a report from Hurricane Specialist Bryan Norcross out of Miami who said, "Ian is forecast to be a Category 4 monster as it enters the Gulf."

September 26, two days before landfall, the GICIA posted another Norcross warning. While it warned of the dangers of storm surge for our area, the hurricane models still had the storm staying off the coast until it reached a point somewhere north of Tampa where, after a slow arc toward the coast, it would make landfall. However, at the beginning of that morning's GICIA message Misty said, "Folks this is one that needs to be watched until it is well north of Boca Grande. This morning Boca Grande

is under a Tropical Storm and Storm Surge Watch."

By late morning on Tuesday, Sept. 26, there was a much more serious tone to all forecasts. However, differences still remained as to where Ian would land.

Dave Osterberg from FOX13 gave the first clue as to Ian's stagnant speed in his announcement. "What is concerning is how slow the storm moves. That means an extended time for high winds, storm surge, and fresh water flooding from rain," he said.

Another meteorologist, Marco La Manno of SNN, came a bit closer to reality. "The cone has narrowed significantly, from an offshore hurricane to a landfall down in Fort Myers."

According to Sallade's report Tuesday morning, hurricane and storm surge warnings were up from Bonita Beach north to Anclote Key and all of the Gulf Coast was in a dangerous situation. He urged everyone to find a place at least 15 feet above sea level.

"He is taking aim at Tampa Bay and the eventual catastrophic outcome may be one for the record books," he said. "I fear greatly for the lives of those who fail to heed guidance from local officials. Ian will intensify to a 140 mph storm over the next 24 to 26 hours, then begin to weaken as it runs headlong into strong wind shear as it nears Tampa Bay ... God bless you all and keep you safe!"

Tuesday evening was when the forecasted direction of the storm really began to change. At 8 p.m. the GICIA sent out an update with Boca Grande Fire Chief C.W. Blosser's emergency message.

"Weather is deteriorating this evening," he said. "The new storm track has it making landfall around Grove City. Storm surge on the island is predicted to be eight to 12 feet in Charlotte Harbor."

The island is under a mandatory evacuation and residents should now be safely off the island."

The morning of Wednesday, Sept. 28 Misty sent out her last weather bulletin with news from Wayne Sallade. "The news is not good," she said. "In fact, the very worse case scenario is currently playing out for the Boca Grande area."

Sallade's report was very succinct. "Major Hurricane Ian is now almost a Category 5, winds have increased to 155 mph and he is just a few hours

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