

Recovery Still 'Façade' in Florida

By Traci Matt
STAFF WRITER

They closed Disneyworld three times. They resulted in the Federal Emergency Management Agency's largest deployment in history, including 9-11. They set weather records dating back over 100 years. They forced evacuations, caused power outages and contributed to more than 60 deaths. And Charley, Frances and Ivan did more than devastate Florida's citrus and tourism industries—they impacted every aspect of the state's economy.

Rebuilder Ron Davis, owner of B & M Starter and Alternator Service in Pensacola, Fla. said he is experiencing "survivor's guilt." His business had only light roof damage and went without utilities for two weeks. But the swath left by hurricane Ivan in September is evident all around him.

"By the grace of God we were spared the worst of it. Overall I don't have anything to complain about," said Davis. "The worst part is the debris. Much of the damage was caused by trees falling. There wasn't an acre in this state that didn't have vegetation damage."

Davis said that although Florida has fallen off the media's radar screen in lieu of election coverage, the recovery process is still in full swing.

"In some places things seem almost normal, but it's just a façade," he said. "We have power and water, the air conditioning is back, there are no long lines at the gas stations anymore. Everything seems to be OK, but the enormity of damage that this area has withstood is unbelievable."

Coastal infrastructure and real estate devastation caused by the 30-foot storm surge are two areas that will take months—if not years—to set right. The waves in the bay "blew the bridges apart" and although one bridge, one way, is now up, there is still tremendous traffic congestion.

"I found myself completely stressed out the other day and realized it was because of the horrendous traffic,"



Residential damage was fairly substantial for Bob Thomas, owner of B&H Electric of Jacksonville.



Jacksonville, Fla. was hit by two of the three storms resulting in double the inconvenience and double the clean-up.



"In Haiti, Ivan killed over 1,000 people and hundreds or thousands more have no shelter or food, or any way to get help. Many more of the 'survivors' will die too. When you consider that, we are lucky." Bob Thomas

said Davis. "There is just so much road damage."

After three weeks of revenue "problems" things seem to be back to normal with customer traffic at B & M. They do on-car work in addition to rebuilding, and the service department is busy with automotive and heavy duty jobs. Davis said the heavy equipment in the area has even provided new opportunities for his shop.

"We're seeing some of the business from the heavy equipment doing recovery efforts," he said. "Being the capitalist pig that I am, I've even had some 18-by-24 signs, like election signs, made with our name and phone number on them. I'm sticking those in the ground around where that equipment is operating. Conventional forms of marketing are not working."

Davis said he provided service to emergency equipment—ambulance, fire, and search and rescue vehicles—immediately after the storm. He said it's important to let rescue workers know how to reach you before the storm hits.

"Make sure people who might need your service have your numbers. Be flexible, provide whatever service you can."

Another victim of Ivan, Joey Ramsey of Panama Alternator and Starter in Panama City, Fla., also counts himself fortunate as the damage to his shop was minimal. After dodging the brunt of the storm, they lost electricity for a day and a half, and only closed for one day.

But Ramsey said business slowed to a crawl as people waited for the storm. For three days he did no business, and for almost a month his revenue was down 50 percent.

"I'm a stickler for being down here and working. But as people waited for the storm, somehow they didn't get around to worrying about starters and alternators," he said. "When you lose 50 percent of your business for four weeks it's tough."

Ramsey, who was also interviewed by the *Exchange* in 1995 after hurricane Opal struck the Panhandle, said ironically now that everything is back to normal in Panama City, his slow season has begun.

Another hurricane veteran, George Ledford, owner of Auto Electric Garage in Mobile, Ala., said that although the

worst of Ivan hit east of them, he has no regrets about evacuating.

"I had been through one in 1979. Fredrick was a Cat 3. That's why I left," he said. "It did a tremendous amount of damage around here. That hurricane blew every building down around it but left my building standing."

Ledford said they had no business for a week during Ivan's approach and retreat.

"I figure I lost about five grand in gross sales, plus \$1,000 to get out of town," he said. He evacuated to Atlanta, but even there they were without power and stranded as felled trees blocked the streets. He said the biggest expense was boredom-busting shopping trips they took once the streets were cleared.

Even suppliers were in the paths of the hurricane triplets. Transpo's Dave Kaplan said the Orlando-based supplier lost about six work days and sustained minor roof and water damage due to Charley and Frances. They also lost several large trees.

"Transpo survived all the storms very well," said Kaplan. "Overall we were definitely blessed."

Although not hit with the strongest winds of either storm, Bob Thomas, owner of B & H Electric in Jacksonville, Fla., felt the fury of Frances over Labor Day weekend. Three weeks later he recalled the events:

"At 1 p.m. on the Sunday that Frances was just reaching the coast-line, I received the phone call no business owner wants to get. The landlord called to tell me the building was on fire (gale force winds had blown the main service line into the edge of the roof). The weather people were warning the worst wind would reach our area around 5 p.m. The shop is 45 miles from my home, and we were already seeing 35 to 40 mile per hour wind and rain.

"My response was, 'Well, there's nothing I can do about it.' After I hung up the phone I realized I had to go in.

"The fire was on the east end of the 115-foot long building and my shop is on the west end. The wind had blown the fire and smoke in my direction. The firemen did a great job and saved my equipment and inventory. All we had was smoke from the fire, but in their effort to

save the building and contents, all doors and windows were sacrificed.

"So, I'm standing in the shop, still warm from the heat, everything covered in soot, it's raining, wind blowing 35 to 40 miles per hour and getting stronger. I'm thinking what I need to get the place secured: plywood, two-by-fours and nails. Only problem there is not a sheet of plywood anywhere within several hundred miles that has not already been sold to someone. As I was wondering what to do next a friend who owns the seafood restaurant across the street pulled up with a pickup load of plywood and a nail gun. He had seen what happened and brought me his plywood.

"I borrowed some used two-by-fours and we framed and covered where the two bay doors had been. I covered the broken windows and repaired the doors enough to get a padlock on them. By now it was after 5 p.m., and wind was up to 50 miles per hour, and I was starting home. I saw power lines popping and trees falling. It took me about 90 minutes to make the 45 mile trip to within a few hundred yards of our driveway.

"There was a huge oak all the way across the road. I called Sarah on the cell phone to tell her I was walking the rest of the way. She said she would drive out to get me, as it was raining very hard at this point. I told her OK, bring the chainsaw with you...

"Power at home was out five days. But the shop was without power for two weeks because of the fire, and what I got back was minimal and temporary. All this was from 'tropical storm force winds.' We did not see any hurricane force wind in northeast Florida.

"Many, many people have seen a bigger impact than those of us in Florida. Except for a few deaths, most people survived without a scratch. Sure they lost some of their 'stuff,' but most had insurance and those who did not can still work and buy more. Nobody really went hungry here. The shelters all had a/c and hot meals. In Haiti, Ivan killed over 1,000 people and hundreds or thousands more have no shelter or food, or any way to get help. Many more of the 'survivors' will die too. When you consider that, we are lucky."

Hurricane season ends November 30.