



Braving the eye of the storm

Seeing hurricane Irma through the eyes of AU students

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Katherine and Grady knew hurricane Irma was en route to become a Category 5 storm, and it did exactly that. During much of its development, its course was unpredictable and the shifting forecasts seemed to be changing with every new model that was released.

They first heard about it with enough time to escape the inevitable rain and winds that would plague the locations they were temporarily calling home.

Junior Katherine Fiore was just beginning to adjust to the heat and humidity that comes with living in Orlando, Fla. She had landed an internship with Disney.

Through the Disney College Program, which offers experiences to students around the world, Katherine landed an internship at Disney's Pop Century Resort. She would work there from August until early January, where she would put her Ashland University hospitality management classes to use in her position at the front desk.

"It's the company I've always wanted to work for, so I really enjoy it down here," Katherine said.

But the course of her internship took a fear-inducing turn when she heard a fierce hurricane was heading in her direction.

Katherine had heard her roommate talking about a hurricane that was headed towards Florida.

"I didn't believe her because I hadn't heard anything about it, so I was like 'Oh, whatever, another hurricane,'" she said.

The world had just seen the monstrosities brought on by Hurricane Harvey in Texas, surely a hurricane of that strength could not be headed towards them – or so she thought.

Senior Grady Millick is spending the semester in Florida as well. He is fulfilling his student teaching requirement for his degree in integrated science education in Venice, a city about 150 miles southwest of where Katherine is staying in Orlando.

Grady's home for the semester is right on the water, in a city that sits on the Gulf Coast. When he moved there, a hurricane was not one of the things he expected.

"I heard about the hurricane maybe a week out and I didn't even know anything about a hurricane and a teacher at the school I'm at said 'Oh, I'm worried about this hurricane,' and I was like 'What?'" Grady said. "She said, 'Yeah we have kids and we live right on the water.' So then I had to look into it myself a week before the storm was even predicted to hit Florida."

A few days later on Sept. 4, the storm would progress into a Category 5.

At this stage in its journey, Irma would bring devastation to Cape Verde, Leeward Islands, Greater Antilles, Turks and Caicos Islands, the Bahamas and Cuba.

The storm would also shatter records for its duration and wind speeds of 138 miles per hour for 37 continuous hours, according to The National Hurricane Center.

Katherine started to substantially worry about Hurricane Irma a week before it was expected to hit Florida.

Projections of whether it would hit the eastern or western coast were up in the air.

There was even a possibility that the storm's path would travel straight up the state.

These possibilities did not deliver much peace of mind since they were still situational to the storm.

If the coast were to be hit by

Irma while it was a Category 4, that could be bad news for the city of Orlando.

Disney prepared for the hurricane as if it were to be a Category 4, resulting in the parks' shut down for two days.

"I tried to keep watching the weather. It was really confusing because you're getting different information from everyone. It was probably the most unpredictable storm that I've ever seen," Katherine said.

Irma's unpredictability had Katherine feeling apprehensive and confused she said. However,

His initial plan was to stay. At that point, it looked like Irma would hit the east coast of the state instead of the west, where he was located. If they were only going to get hit with a minor portion of the storm, he did not see the point in leaving.

Over the next few days, Irma intensified and switched course. Now that the hurricane had become a Category 5, it appeared to be taking an aim towards the Gulf Coast — hitting Venice straight on.

Grady again faced with the decision of whether to stay, putting

she could between the 14 hour shifts her and the other Disney employees were working.

"They actually gave us resort rooms," she said. "There were a bunch of us at the front desk because they had to have people there at all times, but also there was a curfew in place because it wasn't safe for people to be leaving and coming."

Disney prepared her and her coworkers for how to handle the storm.

While working at the front desk, her job mostly consisted of answering guest questions, enforcing the

Grady took Interstate 75 up the coast on one tank of gas as he tried to determine what his destination would be.

Initially, he tried to plan towards Mississippi since he had been in the area before, but that would have been a very a long drive and gas across the area was already short in supply.

"Most of the gas stations ran out of gas because everyone was leaving Florida and the ones that did [have gas] had like 200 cars lined up. So by the time you would have gotten to the gas station, you probably wouldn't have even gotten gas in the first place," Grady said.

This made him nervous, he did not want to be in the shoes of those he passed on the road and be forced to search for gas as the storm moved northward.

Although the traffic was slow and it was nearly impossible to switch lanes, Grady kept driving.

Even the other drivers seemed fearful and nervous as they traveled.

Several vehicles also lost poorly-secured cargo that had been attached to their roofs, like bags of clothes and coolers.

In the meantime, he had been able to arrange plans to stay at his girlfriend's parent's, cousin's house closer to Georgia and northern Florida.

Now he had a plan he should be able to reach.

Grady's Honda Civic safely carried him from Venice to northern Florida.

However, once he entered the Tallahassee area, his fuel indicator light came up on his dashboard.

Grady parked his car and considered his options.

He could either try to find gas, although it was scarce, or sleep in his car for the night.

He was not planning on going down that easily, so he called 15 gas stations until one finally had the precious petroleum he had been looking for.

His Honda Civic drove 30 miles south on low fuel mode to the only gas station in the area to still have gas.

After that, it was an easy drive a little further north to the house that would take him in for the duration of the hurricane.

Katherine and Grady both came out on the other side of Hurricane Irma without any major complications.

Once the storm passed, Katherine was able to return to her normal schedule for work.

The resort she worked at did not take much damage from the storm.

There were a few ceiling fans at the bus stops that lost their blades, a few exit signs blew away, and a few trees fell.

Larger damage at Disney World included Disney's Animal Kingdom, which had a few fallen trees.

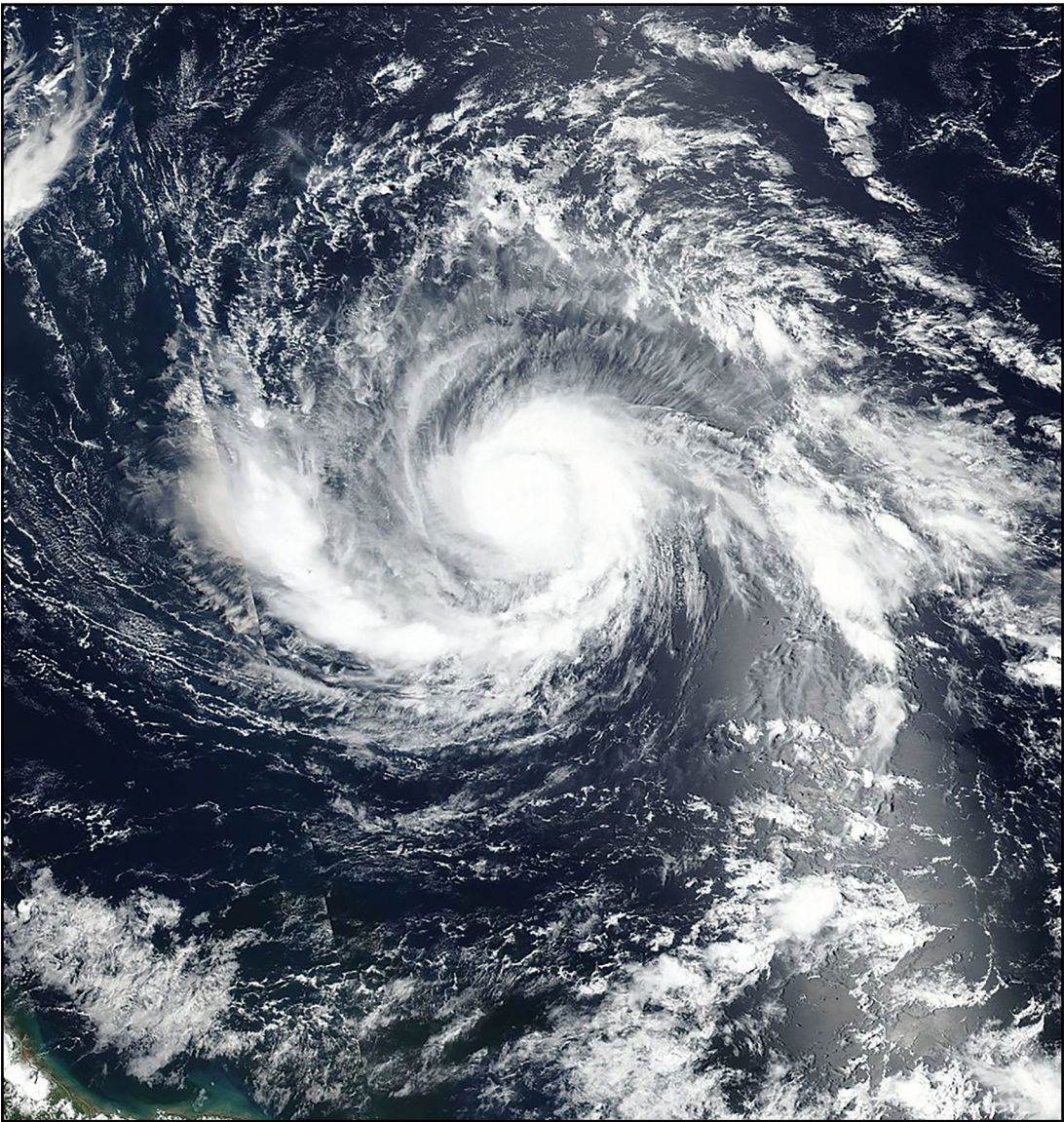
The Jungle Cruise ride at Magic Kingdom was also damaged and shut down from the storm.

Likewise, Grady drove back down to Venice and returned to his student teaching position.

Grady was grateful the house he was staying in experienced a more mild storm than had been expected.

There were still many trees down, mostly palm trees, and even a few evergreens and oak trees, but the damage was repairable.

"If the storm surge hit badly, we could have been under water potentially. But luckily it hit Venice with a Category 2 instead of a Category 5, so it was just a lot of wind and rain. No flooding whatsoever, so we're lucky it went well," Grady said.



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Hurricane Irma was a Category 3 storm when it hit Florida and left millions without power and other utilities.

she continued to watch the weather so she could keep up with any important information that she might need to know.

"I was nervous naturally just because I didn't know what to expect, but it ended up being okay," she said

While Katherine might have been feeling nervous, she had the

"Being from Ohio, I'm not used to hurricanes. We don't really get those."

-Katherine Fiore

support and confidence of her family behind her.

"My family was never really worried, they told me that I'd be fine and I was in the safest place I could be."

She also said it was a comfort to be reminded that many buildings in Florida were designed to withstand hurricanes, especially those on the Disney property where she was staying.

"Being from Ohio, I'm not used to hurricanes. We don't really get those," Katherine said. "But when you have a lot of guests from different places who don't usually get hurricanes, they start to freak out because they don't know what to do. But in Florida they build with hurricane glass and they try to keep them out."

Grady knew that in making preparations for Hurricane Irma, he would need to decide between staying in Venice with his host family or fleeing the storm by traveling north.

himself in the direct line of Irma, or to flee, knowing that the situation on the freeways might end up leaving him stuck on the side of the road.

His host family decided to stay. After spending their entire lives in Florida, they were confident they could make it through the storm.

While Grady had not personally been in a hurricane before, he had seen firsthand the devastation the water and winds could bring.

After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, his family traveled to help restore what had been lost in the havoc of the hurricane.

"I did a lot of mission trips to Mississippi when Hurricane Katrina hit, so I was there three months after that. And we saw that devastation and we saw what hurricanes could do, so my family was super worried," he said.

With this in mind and his family back in Pennsylvania ready to support whatever decision he made, Grady decided to separate from his host family and leave the state.

"Thursday before it hit, I was leaning on whether to stay or go, and I was still going to stay. I woke up Friday morning and I checked in and it was going to hit Venice straight on, so I ended up packing my stuff and headed north without a plan," Grady said.

There was quite a contrast between the exterior of Disney's Pop Century Resort and the dark clouds of Hurricane Irma as they enclosed around the bright, happy design of the hotel.

This was where Katherine would be staying through the duration of the hurricane as a part of the ride-out crew.

She was on the clock for 72 hours straight, sleeping and eating while

curfew and continuing to treat the guests like they were on vacation, because they were.

"We tried to keep it a magical vacation. They had characters come into the lobby, so they could still get the Disney feel," Katherine said.

Irma made landfall and began to weaken into a Category 3 and then down to a Category 2 hurricane after it made landfall in Florida, but the storm still made itself known.

"I was pretty nervous just because in general I don't like thunderstorms and stuff, so hurricanes

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-Grady Millick

are kind of awful," she said.

While Irma still caused damage throughout parts of Florida, Katherine was grateful that it wasn't the Category 5 that had been predicted.

"We actually got pretty lucky because it ended up going right up the center of Florida, which made it weaker," Katherine said.