

When The Storm Comes



*Hurricane Irma brings wind, water, and building damage to communities in Florida
Above: Downed trees and debris fill courtyards and block sidewalks at The Arbors in South Florida*

“Life is a storm...You will bask in the sunlight one moment, be shattered on the rocks the next. What matters is what you do when that storm comes.”

Alexandre Dumas was not the first to quote such a sentiment, and certainly not the last, for it is an age-old lesson. There will be storms of all sizes, figurative and literal, not all of which can be prepared for. Hurricane Irma was a literal storm that inflicted tremendous damage along its several day journey across the Caribbean and Florida, becoming one of only five hurricanes to reach maximum sustained wind speeds of 185mph. Irma maintained those speeds for 37 hours—the longest on record—and tied the Cuba Hurricane of 1932 for the longest lifetime as a Category 5 hurricane in the Atlantic Basin. As devastating as this hurricane promised to be, this was a storm for which MAXX Properties was able to prepare.

Prepare we did, tracking the hurricane’s progress across the Caribbean and assessing the potential outcomes. **Gerry Haak**, Chief Operating Officer, conducted meetings in the week before landfall to develop a crisis management plan along with **Maria Valente**, Vice President of Operations, **Sharon Kraft**, Vice President of Operations, **Rick Latham**, Director of Capital Improvements, and **Michele Bravo**, Florida Regional Manager. By the time Irma made first landfall in Florida on Sunday, September 10th, preparations from around the country were well underway.



September 11th – Flooding at Ascott Place in Tampa, Florida

From Florida

Being a region that is no stranger to tropical storms, the Florida teams are well versed in hurricane procedures. Protocols put in place by Michele had communities stocked with essential hurricane supplies like batteries and chlorine by June 1st. In the days before landfall, Michele held daily meetings with each of her

teams, ensuring all procedures were followed. Residents were kept updated on the most recent path of Irma and notified of what steps to take, such as clearing all items from patios, while employees worked diligently on lowering pool levels, shutting down elevators, and securing loose items such as AC roof units and low tree limbs. In anticipation of severe flooding, office equipment was disconnected and moved to high locations, and chainsaws, plywood, and generators were triple-checked.

Gordon Tier, Floating Maintenance Technician in South Florida, travelled between all four South Florida communities to provide aid to employees and residents alike. In between his other responsibilities, he helped residents carry groceries to their apartments as elevators had been shut down.

“We all know the drill,” Gordon says. “Thanks to Michele and Gerry, we knew the plan, before and after, and we got it done.”

Sandy Arocha, Community Manager of Colonial Village in South Florida, gathered extra cases of water and snacks for employees and residents.

“We pictured the worst,” Sandy says. “When it comes to hurricane preparation, you have to be creative.”

Florida was ready, and settled in to wait.

From Afar

Support did not end within Florida’s boundaries. Associates from New York, Denver, Las Vegas, and Phoenix were ready to head to Florida to assist during and after Hurricane Irma hit. Headed by Gerry, a crisis management team was formed in New York and quickly began gathering the much needed supplies that would be essential in Irma’s aftermath. Regional Project Manager **Richard Schunk**, New York Regional Manager **Luan Ndreshaj**, Glenwood Gardens’ Community Manager **Artur Pepaj**, and Maintenance Supervisor **Sam Berdynaj** stepped forward as volunteers to drive supply trucks the 1200+ mile trek without hesitation.

In a planning call with Michele, the team was warned of the current conditions.

“I don’t want to scare you,” she said, “but you may have no cell service, no GPS, and no food. You’ll have to rely on old-fashioned paper maps because there may not be any street signs.”

In addition to hurricane relief supplies such as



September 12th – Luan Ndreshaj, Sam Berdynaj, Richard Schunk, and Artur Pepaj set off from New York



Gas fill-up at one of the only open stations

plywood, 2x4 construction material, gloves, chainsaws, gas cans, gas funnels, generators, and over 40 cases of water, the team prepared each truck to allow them to be self-sufficient both on the drive to Florida and once arrived. Meals were self-opening cans of sardines, chick peas, tuna, beans, pistachios, and power bars packed in block ice. Despite the knowledge of the danger they would be travelling towards, MAXX's four Musketeers were nothing but positive.

Armed with their truckloads, the team departed New York in the early morning hours Tuesday, September 12th. Georgia had also been hit with widespread torrential rains and tornadoes, causing road and exit closures and several National Guard checkpoints. Still, they made good time, relying on the APP *Gas Buddy* to locate open gas stations along the journey while cellphone service was still accessible. By Wednesday morning they'd reached Florida, Artur and Richard heading for Tampa and Luan and Sam to South Florida.

The plan was to divide and conquer.



Downed trees at The Palms in South Florida

The Aftermath

Hurricane Irma barreled through Florida Sunday, September 10th into Monday, September 11th, leaving extensive wind, water, and building damage in its wake.

Our communities were spared a direct hit, though the indirect impact was felt physically and emotionally nonetheless. The damage in South Florida was more extensive, with trees down, curbs pulled up, roof and window leaks, flooding, and structural damage for some communities. Tampa experienced mostly debris blown about by the wind, although Deerpath on the Lake suffered the worst with a tree falling into their pool and another through a resident apartment.

Despite the circumstances, MAXX employees dove in to recovery efforts as soon as they were able. The teams came together, office staff even helping maintenance to clear downed tree limbs and scattered debris.

“It was a lot of mess,” says **Chad Miller**, Maintenance Supervisor at The Upton in South Florida, “but we all worked together.”

The Upton was the only community to retain power, giving the teams momentum when they returned after the storm. For The Arbors at Greynolds Park in South Florida, damage was more severe.

“It looked like a bomb went off,” **Ivan Mihelac**, Maintenance Supervisor at The Arbors, recalls the scene. “The sidewalks were covered with so much debris you couldn’t walk. One tree fell through a first floor balcony.”



A tree lands across fencing and into the pool at Deerpath in Tampa, Florida



Fence and sign damage at Colonial Village in South Florida

Clean-up was elevated with the arrival of the New York teams. In Tampa, Artur and Richard tackled the enormous tree that had fallen into the swimming pool and taken down a fence at Deerpath, keeping small towels dipped in ice water wrapped about their heads to remain cool. In South Florida, Luan and Sam headed to The Arbors first, removing downed fencing blocking parking lots and chopping larger trees into manageable sizes to be moved. Gerry met the team in South Florida and worked with Michele to assess damages and schedule repairs. Meanwhile, Ivan worked tirelessly, managing the many maintenance calls that were pouring in along with the hurricane repairs and tree limb and debris removal from the roofs.

With The Arbors in good hands, the New York team moved on to The Upton to continue recovery efforts. When it was time to depart, reinforcement was already arriving from Denver and life at the communities was beginning to get back to normal.

Maintenance Supervisor **Paul Salmans** from Parliament, Maintenance Supervisor **Giovanni Ramirez Sanders** from Webster Lake, Lead Maintenance Technician **Matthew Jones** from Oak Ridge, and Lead Maintenance Technician **Scott Leckrone** from 300 East 17th flew in to spend a week with the Florida teams assisting with further recovery.

While the damage was certainly a priority, the main concern for each team remained their residents' wellbeing. For **Alexis Rolon**, Community Manager of Deerpath, the property and residents came before home.

"I was most concerned for our elderly residents," Alexis says. "I wanted them to be taken care of, and made sure each was placed with family or a shelter prior to the storm." She has even continued to check in daily, noting how shaken some residents were upon return to the property after the storm.

Similarly, Sandy at Colonial Village was more concerned for her residents than her own home, which was without power for several days. Using a battery operated fan in her office so as not to use the property generator on her own comfort, she brought water to residents and offered moral support.

At The Palms at Forest Hills in South Florida, Community Manager **Rachel Rosas** kept her residents



From left: Downed trees fill the courtyard at The Arbors and another pulls up the curbing and blacktop at The Upton in South Florida

informed every step of the way. With partial power in the leasing office in the days after Irma, residents were invited to come charge their devices and make calls. Across all the communities, offices and clubhouses were opened for residents to come cool down, get daily updates, and simply be together after the traumatic ordeal they'd all shared.

Diana Conaty, Community Manager at Ascott Place in Tampa, recalls the fear of the unknown unsettling everyone the most.

“Usually we get hurricane alerts and nothing happens. This was different,” she says. “But everyone—from MAXX to Ascott’s residents—was so strong and willing to help in any way.”



A tree is pulled up on the water's edge at Arbour Ponds in Tampa, Florida

Living an hour away, Diana credits her Maintenance Technician, **Isas Chapman**, and Leasing Consultant, **Dyon Polk**, for communicating phenomenally. Both employees reside on site and provided Diana daily updates. “I couldn’t have done it without them,” she says.

For new Community Manager of The Upton, **Angelica Lopez**, the hurricane served as a trial and an opportunity. She had only been a part of the team for a few days when Irma hit, but invited Assistant Manager, **Lois Goulette**, to stay in her home as Lois lost power for over a week.

“It was a great opportunity to get to know Lois and build rapport,” Angelica says.

At Arbour Ponds in Tampa, Maintenance Supervisor **Brian Hunt** says preparation on the property was key in bouncing back. They experienced sewage flooding from manholes, and a few trees caused issues along with loss of power, but everything came together well and today it is as if the storm was never there. Though the hurricane’s impact was less intense than inspected, it was still devastating to plan for potential losses. During the power loss at home, Brian recalls being unable to keep food from spoiling in the heat, and being unable to even get into a McDonald’s for food to feed his large family.

“We were fortunate to stay at our church, which had power and allowed us use of the fridge,” Brian says. “It’s amazing to be able to make ice and have a cold drink. This was a life-changing experience.”



From left: Gordon Tier and Sandy Arocha tackle tree removal; Residents come out with brooms to help with clean-up; Sam Berdynaj installs a custom built roof hatch at The Arbors; Artur Pepaj and Richard Schunk remove Deerpath’s downed tree

The Sunlight

Today, residents are cheerful and have carried on with overall positivity. They have expressed sentiments of gratitude for each community's preparation, communication, and quick action.

Leslie Puerta, Community Manager of The Arbors, says that despite all the damage, residents have had very good attitudes, especially remarking on the impact resistant windows diminishing the sound of the hurricane winds howling outside.

"Our residents have just been amazing," she says.

Across all communities, it was not just MAXX that worked to provide comfort for the residents, but many residents came out to offer their aid in the recovery efforts as well. Residents of Deerpath passed out refreshments as the team worked in the 106 degree heat, and residents of The Upton even sent thank you cards. Others turned out with brooms and shovels to help clear debris.



September 16th – Top: Pools are cleared and open at The Upton; Bottom: Pool is open and temporary fence is installed at Deerpath

In just four days after Hurricane Irma swept through our communities, power was restored at all communities, the teams had debris cleared away, pools reopened, and resident events were planned for the weekend. Unit and minor exterior repairs continue, but we had ample planning, great use of resources, and an extraordinary display of teamwork and spirit. In the wake of disasters, the words *employees* and *residents* become inconsequential. Titles no longer matter, small troubles are forgotten, and we remember that we are in this together. All associates and residents experienced a generational storm, and our teams have proven once again the strength of the MAXX family.



September 16th – Ascott Place holds a resident pool party under blue skies

"What matters is what you do when that storm comes."

When this storm came, the MAXX teams were ready, standing and facing it with preparation, resilience, and positivity.

Today, we enjoy the sunlight.