

Richard Quiroz

Shelter From the Storm

Richard Quiroz: Hello, welcome to South Texas Stories, my name is Richard Quiroz. Today you'll be listening to the story of how a small shelter made a huge impact for a community against Hurricane Harvey. Hurricane Harvey impacted the Gulf Coast of Texas in the pre-dawn hours of August 25th, 2017, growing from a category 3 to a category 4 storm within a matter of hours the day before. In addition to the damage sustained by the many local communities, the storm impacted the personal experiences of the people who witnessed it first-hand. From the impact of Harvey, and the human need for community, this is a story about shelter from the storm.

[Insert Sound Clip]¹

Richard Quiroz: When we think of temporary shelters, what tends to come to mind are community centers, or even local sports stadiums. However, what if I told you that no matter how small a shelter may be, the impact it has is what matters. For example, let's look at Refugio Texas. A small, quiet town not far from the Texas Coast. It is a community where neighbors know one another, where you are likely to see them at a community event on the weekend. Where friends will load up their pickups for a few hours of fishing, and talk about Friday night's football game. The shelter I want to tell you about today is called Joy Ministries, and this story proves that no matter how small a shelter is, its impact will always be felt.

Joel Garcia: During Harvey we just happened to be there. At other times we buy shoes for back to school and for the kids we do a party at Christmas which brings in about 500 people. And we feed people and we just try to meet a need so that the neighborhood could grow up well-adjusted and also, just to make a difference and be there for anybody who needs assistance and also to uh, to do what we're called to do.

Richard Quiroz: This is Joel Garcia speaking about Joy Ministries. He is a pastor, a husband, a father, and is well known in town. In August of 2017 Joy Ministries would operate as a "gathering" place for the town of Refugio, Texas. Gathering places are specific locations which operate as some form of assistance in the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster, usually in the form of shelter.² I asked him about his experiences with hurricanes in his youth, and how the community would prepare for them.

Joel Garcia: "I remember hurricanes like, I think it was [Hurricane] Carla, we just went to spend the night and we went home, and there was another hurricane when we was in high school. I think it might have been [Hurricane] Allen, and we went to the school, we sheltered down there and you know, ate canned goods, and then we went home. But this was totally different."

Richard Quiroz: No one knows exactly how the impact of a storm will play out. The most we are able to predict is the path a major hurricane like Harvey takes. I asked Mr. Garcia how Joy

¹ ERH. "Guitar acstg v2201b2626" Freesound. Published on November 3, 2018
<https://freesound.org/people/Audeption/sounds/425173/>

² Mary M. Nelan and Ronald L. Schumann III. "Gathering Places in the Aftermath of Hurricane Harvey", *Disaster Prevention and Management* 2018.

Ministries became a shelter in the wake of the gigantic storm that continued to grow in the Gulf of Mexico.

Joel Garcia: During Harvey the reason that we opened up to be a shelter was because we built a new church and we had to build it according to Windstorm Code [Texas Windstorm Insurance Agency Windstorm Code for Building Construction], because it was on the east side of [Route] 77. So, what we did was we built it to code, and when Harvey came, uh-- actually in Refugio, they had a mandatory evacuation so like that, when a mandatory evacuation, the county doesn't have to provide shelter, and there was no shelters in town. I started getting calls about twelve o'clock, and uh, we're going to open up, and I call the man who built the church and I said, "Hey um what do you think?" He says, "Well, we didn't cut any corners, so it's a good time to find out.

[Insert Clip]³

Richard Quiroz: Over the course of the storm ten to fifteen inches of rain drenched Refugio County and broader areas.⁴ I wondered how it would be possible to let the residents of the surrounding community know that a shelter was available when the storm came. I asked Mr. Garcia how they were able to spread the word that Joy Ministries would serve as a church for the time being.

Joel Garcia: Well we made the decision about twelve o'clock. About one o'clock I called the Sherriff and I told him, look we got some people got nowhere to go, they don't have no vehicles or nothing. So we're going to open up. I knew the responsibility that we had, but I was trusting God, and that our building was build according to code, and we didn't cut any corners. And so we were going to do the best we could do so. We made beds out of the chairs, put them together. Some people brought their own blankets, and it's probably word of mouth more than anything.

[Insert Clip]⁵

Richard Quiroz: Communication was key for the community to have. The Church turned shelter proved to be critical for the community in the coming days. For other areas closer to the Gulf of Mexico than Refugio, damage was extensive. Many homes were destroyed, businesses had their glass windows cracked or shattered. Boards and road signs were tossed with other debris on the slick surface roads. Telephone poles toppled and stretched their wires to the ground. Even natural land features such as coastlines were swallowed by the storm surge. Piece by piece. Countless trees across several coastal counties were damaged as well.⁶ As for Mr. Garcia, there was still the matter of his own home and family that he still had to attend to.

³ InspectorJ. "Wind Chimes." Freesound. Published on September 1, 2016.
<https://freesound.org/people/InspectorJ/sounds/353194/>

⁴ Weather.gov. 2017. *Major Hurricane Harvey - August 25-29, 2017*. National Weather Service.

⁵ Audeption. "Thunderstorm with heavy rain part1." Freesound. Published on April 14, 2018.

⁶ Eric S. Blake and David A. Zelinsky. "National Hurricane Center Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Harvey 17 August-1 September 2017", *National Hurricane Center* 2018

Joel Garcia: I had my own things to take care of that night. My front door blew in, and my windows blew out. And I stayed up all night, and it started getting harder and harder to deal with it, because it wasn't stopping. About four o'clock in the morning I ask God to stop it, and it stopped about five [a.m.]. I walked outside, and I saw mobile homes in the middle of the road. Power lines down, trees down. I personally had lost all the trees in my yard, my fences, my windows were blown out. My neighbor's roof was gone, part of my roof was gone. It's just devastation, so um, I went ahead and kept my word, and we still had gas. The electricity had gone out about nine o'clock the night before.

Richard Quiroz: The storm cause much damage across Refugio Texas, but it was the stories that stuck with Mr. Garcia the most. Every person had their own story to share with Mr. Garcia. People talked about what they did to prepare, or what they had to do in order to remain safe from the sheer ferocity of the storm. From their own words, residents recalled to him what they did to protect themselves.

Joel Garcia: "A man with his kids hunkered down in a bathroom. A lady told me, she said that she was at her house and it got so bad that she jumped in her bathtub and she put, the pot she cooked tamales over her head, and put a mattress over her. You know, but it's things that you did, I thought that was kind of funny. I said, "For real" she said, "For real". (Laughs). You know, I went to school with her, and it's kind of funny, but it was for real.

Richard Quiroz: Moments like the one Mr. Garcia described occurred for different residents who arrived at the shelter. Over there, local residents stayed together and met with one another the days following Hurricane Harvey past. Some people went home believing that their homes, though damaged, would still be standing. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case when I asked him about that.

Richard Quiroz: With uh, people were leaving and whenever they found out their houses were severely damage and they came back, did you anticipated that may have- that would have happened during the storm?

Joel Garcia: No actually, I was thinking it was going to be like when we were little, that you know, we just spend the night and went home. That was not the case, people came back, so we decided that- a man at the church had a food truck so, we started taking things from the freezers and started feeding people.

Richard Quiroz: Joy ministries would prove to be a strong social foundation for the community in the weeks that followed. People at the church assisted each other, and helped each other during their times of need. Joy Ministries became a "place attachment" for residents. Despite the name, "place attachment" is not just about location but is essential due to the "shared norms of trust" that community members place within one another.⁷The actions by Mr. Garcia

⁷ Mary M. Nelan and Ronald L. Schumann III. "Gathering Places in the Aftermath of Hurricane Harvey", *Disaster Prevention and Management* 2018.

and the church members would prove to be vital for residents. I asked Mr. Garcia about the availability of food, and the resources needed for the coming days.

Joel Garcia: “Well like I said, we had no electricity and there was no gas. There was, matter of fact the Valero in town, and also there was another place here, they brought all of their food over so we can cook it. You know, like they had a bunch of burritos, fast food burritos, egg rolls, and things like that nature. They brought all that food, all their frozen food over, and we were cooking it. Most of the time we had three square meals, but somebody would come in, like at ten o’clock or two o’clock. Then you know, we would make some burritos, or we always had something to eat their, burritos, chips, or egg rolls. But we always had a big pot of coffee, we had several pots of coffee. I had a man come after me and he said “Joel, do you have a cup of coffee?” And I said, “Yeah man,” and I got him a big cup of coffee. I said, “You want anything in it?” He said “No, I’ll take it black”. You know things like that, you know. A couple of guys came in and they said, “Man I never thought I had to stand in line for a taco.” I said, “You know what brother? We all stand in a line.”

Richard Quiroz: As a group, Mr. Garcia and other church members were able to provide food to the residents, due to the donations of other residents in the community. This is a common practice in the aftermath of natural disasters. One study found that shared traumatic experiences from natural disasters such as storms actually “facilitates the successful pursuits of goals.”⁸ Through a shared situation, and common pursuits for the community at the church, these efforts grew further into other areas as well.

Joel Garcia: “It was a good fellowship, that everybody was like in the same boat, and there was no um-- because I’m going to tell you something brother, I don’t care how much money you had, you couldn’t buy nothing, because everything was closed. You know, so you couldn’t buy no food, you couldn’t buy no soda water. Man, I wanted a Diet Dr Pepper so bad, and they called us over to the Valero to pick some stuff up, and I asked the lady for a Diet Dr. Pepper, and it was hot, but it was good. (Laughs).

Richard Quiroz: Donations were crucial for the next few weeks directly in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. Many organizations, and local individuals donated what they had to group centered gathering places that operated as shelters. On the Refugio County website titled “Hurricane Harvey Information” more info was available for donations, and availability to inform people by September 9 2017.⁹

Joel Garcia: We were so busy where we were at because we were feeding like five hundred people a day. And we were doing it- we ran out of food, because people were just bringing in-

⁸ Long, Laura J, Steven L Bistricky, Colleen A Phillips, and Johann M D’Souza. “The Potential Unique Impacts of Hope and Resilience on Mental Health and Well-Being in the Wake of Hurricane Harvey.” *Journal of traumatic stress*. 2020

⁹ Refugio County Texas. “Hurricane Harvey Information: Refugio”.
<http://www.co.refugio.tx.us/page/refugio.Refugio>

like the people who stayed at the Church they went and got their stuff from their freezers. And I was telling a friend of mine that we were on the keto [Ketogenic] diet and we didn't even know it! (Both laugh)

Joel Garcia: So, that's all we were eating. There was no vegetables, there was no fruits. And about, maybe eight days into it, H-E-B brought us all their vegetables, and we were able to feed people vegetables and fruits, because they didn't have any power also.

Richard Quiroz: The church was able to continue to assist residents for days to come. For the time being they depended on one another, unifying against the remnants of the storm, and necessities needed. Like the other communities, each person played a role in assisting their neighbor in any way they could for the time being. What allowed Joy Ministries to operate as an effective "gathering place" was due to the social resources available, such as food, shelter, and unity.¹⁰ In the following days, as federal organizations moved in, and residents began to clean up, I asked Mr. Garcia if he saw how the community came closer during times of distress.

Joel Garcia: "Yeah, I say a fellowship is because people used to come there, like in the mornings, and they would drink coffee, and they would sit and talk. Then what happened, after the church cleared out, some people didn't want to leave because they didn't know where they were going they were well secured, we had to move them on. I told them you have to go to the Red Cross so you can get into the system, so they could start working with you. And they did. After those fifteen days, we made Joy Ministries into a cooling shelter, into a cooling place, where people were coming in. People were bringing in groups into Refugio to do work, and we had Gatorade, we had sandwiches at lunch, and um, you can come in there, we had that air-conditioner going. And um, people would cool, off, talk a little bit, and get a plan and go back out to work. We did that for a couple of weeks."

Richard Quiroz: And it was still summer too, after Hurricane Harvey right?

Joel Garcia: Yeah. And then- I tell you, I never seen so much mosquitos in my life.

[insert sound Clip]¹¹

Richard Quiroz: The days that followed begin a community clean up, removing down trees, and repairing damaged homes, and property. It was still summertime, and in the hot humid climate that engulfs the coastal air in South Texas, the people assisted one another. As more residents of the shelter slowly left, the church remained a social block for the community. Mr. Garcia describes this point.

Joel Garcia: "And then people would come by and say well, can you help me with this, let's get some guys and go tarp up a house or something. And uh, it was a place to get a plan, and get a good cup of hot coffee, get the day started, then come back and eat. But we had some good

¹⁰ Mary M. Nelan and Ronald L. Schumann III. "Gathering Places in the Aftermath of Hurricane Harvey".

¹¹ sergiolanza. "Cicadas-like.aff". Freesound, May 18th, 2019. Accessed on 10/26/2020, <https://freesound.org/people/sergiolanza/sounds/470761/>.

people too, the people who were staying at the church really came, and they started- they really ran the business, they ran like, people who didn't have no place to go, they were waiting on Red Cross. They did the food distribution, the organization, the helping with the cooking, the cleaning up, you know, because it would be like a mess.

Richard Quiroz: Like Mr. Garcia, the members of Joy Ministries, and the other churches in Refugio, Texas they immediately began to provide any form of assistance that they could. It wouldn't be until much later, that disaster relief organizations such as the Red Cross, or FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] came in. But for the immediate future, residences depended on one another. Over time, more people lent their time and efforts to help their neighbors with any damage. They assisted with down fences, broken branches, tarping a window, you name it. These "social networks" were vital for Refugio residences, and prove to remain strong directly after the passing of the storm¹² In his reflection Mr. Garcia describes what has changed over the past three years after Hurricane Harvey hit.

Joel Garcia: "You know, everything takes time, but things have been steady moving. Things have been steady in getting rebuilt, it's just what- when will it be over, I think and honestly I told a person after the storm that Refugio will never be the same. It changed completely, different houses, different, people moved away. It'll never be the same as I knew it growing up in it. It's a totally different town, I think that is a lot more unity, there's a lot more, not taking things for granted."

Richard Quiroz: After Hurricane Harvey had passed it was assessed that the main cause for its' strength was due to very warm ocean heat, a strong indicator of climate change.¹³ To give you an idea of the storms rapid growth, just two days before it was known as "Tropical Depression Harvey" on August 23rd, 2017.¹⁴ Even the time of this interview on September 20th, 2020, Tropical Storm Beta was close by and I actually feared that I would have to re-schedule. Again. Fortunately, Tropical Storm Beta didn't disrupt network connections, though I found it eerily strange how we were discussing a major past hurricane, during a Tropical Storm.

Joel Garcia: You know you got downed trees, and people need to refuel. And um, its-it's happening a lot more, you know you look at things like the fires in the West Coast, and you know, people losing things, losing everything.

Richard Quiroz: With the force of Mother Nature

Joel Garcia: Yeah, but you know we're going to persevere. As a pastor, I got to say, if it hadn't been for Jesus, there be no hope at all brother.

¹² Rivera, Jason D. "Returning to Normalcy in the Short Term: A Preliminary Examination of Recovery from Hurricane Harvey among Individuals with Home Damage." *Disasters* 2019

¹³ Kevin E. Trenberth, Lijin Cheng, Peter Jacobs, Yongxin Zhang, John Fasullo. "Hurricane Harvey Links to Ocean Heat Content and Climate Change" *Earth's Future*. 2018.

¹⁴ Weather.gov. 2017. *Major Hurricane Harvey - August 25-29, 2017*. National Weather Service.

Richard Quiroz: The story of Joy Ministries shows how a small church turned shelter, was important for the residences nearby, during a major storm. In the face of adversity, the small shelter helped many people, showing it's vital role for others. For people like Mr. Garcia, members of the small church and community, they came together and assisted many residents of their own accord. With their efforts, and the efforts of many other small town residents, this is a story of how through perseverance and faith through one another, people are able to triumph in the face of adversity.

[Final Sound Clip]¹⁵

¹⁵ Lemoncreme. "Guitar Music". FreeSound. Published on December 22, 2013.

Bibliography

- ERH. "Guitar acstg v2201b2 62 6." Freesound. Published on November 3, 2018.
<https://freesound.org/people/ERH/sounds/62315/>.
- Nelan, Mary M. and Ronald L. Schumann III. "Gathering Places in the Aftermath of Hurricane Harvey." *Disaster Prevention and Management* 27, no. 5 (2018); 508-522.
- US Department of Commerce, NOAA. "Major Hurricane Harvey - August 25-29, 2017." National Weather Service. NOAA's National Weather Service, May 1, 2019. Accessed 9 3, 2020
https://www.weather.gov/crp/hurricane_harvey.
- Blake, Eric S & Zelinsky, David A. "National Hurricane Center Tropical Cyclone Report Hurricane Harvey" 17 August – 1 September 2017 Date Accessed 9 3, 2020
https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL092017_Harvey.pdf.
- InspectorJ. "Wind Chimes." Freesound. Published on September 1st, 2016.
<https://freesound.org/people/InspectorJ/sounds/353194/>.
- Audeption. "Thunderstorm with heavy rain part1." Freesound. Published on April 14, 2018.
<https://freesound.org/people/Audeption/sounds/425174/>.
- Long, Laura J, Steven L Bistricky, Colleen A Phillips, and Johann M D'Souza. "The Potential Unique Impacts of Hope and Resilience on Mental Health and Well-Being in the Wake of Hurricane Harvey." *Journal of traumatic stress*. (June 29, 2020). Accessed 9 3, 2020
<https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.manowar.tamucc.edu/doi/full/10.1002/jts.22555>.
- Refugio County Texas: "Hurricane Harvey". Accessed October 30th, 2020.
<http://www.co.refugio.tx.us/page/refugio.Refugio>.
- Sergiolanza. "Cicada-like." Freesound. Published on May 18th, 2018.
<https://freesound.org/people/sergiolanza/sounds/470761/>.
- Rivera, Jason D. "Returning to Normalcy in the Short Term: A Preliminary Examination of Recovery from Hurricane Harvey among Individuals with Home Damage." *Disasters* 44, no. 3 (2020): 548-568. Accessed on 9 3, 2020 <https://doi-org.manowar.tamucc.edu/10.1111/disa.12387>.
- Trenberth, Kevin. E, Lijing, Cheng, Peter Jacobs, Yonxin Zhang, John Fasullo, and Univ. Corp. for Atmospheric Research, Boulder, CO (United States). "Hurricane Harvey Links to Ocean Heat Content and Climate Change Adaptation." *Earth's Future* 6, no. 5 (2018): 730-744.
- Lemoncreme. "Guitar Music". Freesound. Published on December 22nd, 2013.
<https://freesound.org/people/Lemoncreme/sounds/211492/>.