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Hurricane Florence hit North Carolina on September 12th, 2018. It stayed until the 15th, leaving the East Coast with devastating damage. Over 10,000 residents were displaced, and at least 27 people died¹. My city alone suffered 16.65 inches of rainfall². Many people evacuated, only to come back and find their houses flooded or wrecked with debris. Many of my close friends lost their homes. Businesses, churches, and schools closed for at least two weeks. I spent that time helping others in need. Those two weeks changed my perspective of citizenship.

The stench of a dead cat and dirty water greeted me at the entrance. I stood awkwardly in the house packing wet food. I didn't know what to say. Here I was, a middle-class girl, in the center of the projects, helping a friend salvage her possessions. She lost most of her things and wanted to save what she could. Water filled the small apartment but receded by the time we arrived. I stayed silent for the majority of the time I worked in my friend's apartment. I felt nervous being in a dangerous part of the city and nearly had a panic attack when some of her neighbors entered the house to help. My heart beat rapidly, but I put on a calm, relaxed face. Regardless of where I was, my friend needed help. We helped her temporarily move into her mother's house. A few months later, she found a new apartment, and once again we took her possessions and helped her relocate.

I couldn't find apartment 17. We searched my church friend's suburb hoping her house had not suffered too much damage. When we drove down her street, all hope drained from my face. Both sides of the road overflowed with mattresses, cabinets, chairs, and beloved possessions. My heart was heavy when we finally found her apartment. Despite the devastation, relief efforts were already underway; a surplus of volunteers in blue shirts helped the neighborhood recover. We eventually found my friend at her brother's home, where she stayed after the storm. Fortunately, only the first floor of her apartment flooded. A few days later, we took my friend to a local church that gave away hurricane supplies. We helped her gather food, toiletries, and cleaning items. Even though she lost everything in the first floor of her apartment, she refrained from taking too much so that others would have plenty to satisfy their needs. The volunteers at the church genuinely cared for her. Before we left, a few of them came and prayed with us. Although she moved back into her apartment in December, she is still waiting for cabinets and a few appliances.

The rental home was ruined. Water flooded through the ceiling and the floor for three days. Ceiling tiles fell; mold covered the walls and closets. My church rents out a few houses, and the interior of this house flooded. The sweet elderly renter wanted to move the few remaining items to her sister's house nearby. Our small group of church members loaded dressers, desks, and chairs onto a trailer for transport. While my parents helped the renter relocate, I spent the day ripping out soaked carpet and sweeping out standing water.

I was not alone in my desire to help out friends. The whole community changed during the disaster and recovery period. Everybody came together to help. Even President Trump came and helped my classmate and other volunteers pass out meals to those who needed food. As the days went by, I realized how supportive my community became. Hurricane Florence, like other disasters, was no respecter of persons. Rich, poor, and middle-class were all affected. Just like disasters, recovery did not discriminate. Nervousness and prejudices of the past dissolved as people of all races and social classes worked alongside each other. Everyone helped, regardless of who they were. Middle-class alongside lower-class. President alongside student. Compassion flourished from every source. I learned how to be a citizen during those two weeks.

I once thought being a citizen meant joining the military or being active in politics. I was completely wrong. Citizenship is helping during disaster. It is coming together as a community to overcome tragedy. It is ambition achieved by selflessness. True citizens put the needs of others above themselves. Normal schedules were discarded as the community came together. During those weeks, no one cared about their appearance or what others thought. The only thing that mattered was helping others. As recovery progressed, kindness overflowed. I will never forget the lessons that this disaster taught me. Hurricane Florence transformed me into a citizen.

Works Cited

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