

## PHILANTHROPY MATTERS

# Irma, the Blessing



by Kristen Livengood,  
Big Pine  
Resident

*As the Ocean Reef Community Foundation works to assess needs and provide post-hurricane solutions through our Florida Keys Hurricane Response efforts, we'll share our Philanthropy Matters space with a series of guest columnists to bring the Hurricane Irma experience beyond Ocean Reef's gates home for our readers. The first of these is The Weekly Newspapers writer Kristen Livengood, who was born and raised in Marathon and bought a house in hard-hit Big Pine Key with her husband in 2008. They have two girls together. Kristen says she's "stronger for it now and proud to be a part of the relief efforts in the Lower Keys." Characteristically as tough as their namesake, she and her Conch (as natives of the Keys are known) neighbors have chosen to see the storm that upended their lives as a blessing.*

Sixty days post Irma, there is still a mound of trash piled in my backyard waiting to get picked up. We came back home to Big Pine Key two days after the storm. I was warned by our neighbors that our house was bad, "Bedrooms are flooded; kitchen and living room look OK; house smells {really bad}; bring bleach," he said through the poor connection of a satellite phone.

We pulled into the house around



Marina Livengood, 5, explores her Big Pine Key neighborhood after Hurricane Irma. The storm took its toll on the Lower Keys.

8 p.m. making it before curfew after machete chopping our way down the street. A telephone pole had floated underneath our house, the fence was gone in many sections, every tree we owned, most that we planted from sprouts over the past 10 years, either had its head ripped off or was laying between us and the front door. Our neighbors hollered out to make sure we weren't looters, while we told war stories putting off the inevitable before going inside.

There's nothing that can prepare someone seeing for the first time the damage a storm surge can cause. Luckily, Irma only damaged our two bedrooms and a bathroom, with water coming up two feet in our split-level home. Our once 3/2 is now a 1/1. Everything that was high enough for the surge not to touch, the force of the water knocked off walls and shelves with ease. Our wedding photos on the ground, the kid's baby shoes soaking wet knocked off of bookcases, my grandmother's Oakland A's shirt I've had since I was eight-years-old that I'll never find another like, all covered in a grey sludge.

But, what Irma took from us, we

gained in community. We found real neighbors while we grilled out every night together under the "oh my gosh I can't believe it's still standing" tiki hut, no fences to divide us. We were inspired by strangers, who stopped by to leave food, ice, incidentals, and gift cards. We learned a deep sense of family playing board games by the light of battery operated Christmas lights in 90 degree September weather. We found our friendships deeper than ever from those who sent things, offered help, or just showed

up to rip out moldy drywall or carry out a 700,000-pound soaking wet king-sized bed. We laughed together, and cried together, and we looked at this all and realized how lucky we truly are to have all of the "things" Irma gave us.

We are lucky to call the Keys home, not because of where we are, but because who we are with – an amazing community that always pulls together to help one another.

So, now, two months in, while I look at our trash heap, I smile. The heap is filled with chainsawing 101, sweat dripping from everywhere, ripping out memories, and piling them high. I don't see trash. I see piles of our lives, of everyone's lives, where we get to see how far we have come and that we still have so much to be thankful for – each other.

*To make a tax-deductible donation to the Florida Keys Hurricane Response Fund, please mail your check made payable to the Ocean Reef Community Foundation with Florida Keys Hurricane response in the memo line to: 35 Ocean Reef Drive, Suite 148, Key Largo, FL 33037.*

