

Chicago Tribune

Commentary |

David McGrath: Hurricane Helene was brutal....

OPINION COMMENTARY

**David McGrath: Hurricane Helene was brutal.
Thankfully, the NOAA gave us warning.**



Author David McGrath works on tying down objects at his Florida home before Hurricane Helene makes landfall.
(Marianne McGrath)



By **DAVID MCGRATH**

PUBLISHED: October 1, 2024 at 5:00 a.m.

Mother Nature via Florida's hurricane season is like one of the carpetbagging roofers and con artists who routinely travel here to exploit our suffering and vulnerability.

Except that she works her sting ahead of the storm, lulling us into a false sense of security with richly blue and cloudless skies, gentle surf of crystal clear waters, and lovely sea breezes that moderate the tropical temperatures.

But we know better.

Thanks to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's newest high-resolution radar, NEXRAD, Marianne and I got sufficient warning about Hurricane Helene two full days before its approach.

So even as I looked across the sparkling Gulf of Mexico, I was not fooled, having already seen NOAA's projected storm track for the next 48 hours, which looked suspiciously similar to Hurricane Ian's two years ago. That storm's path was also projected to pass us by in Port

Charlotte, staying out to sea; but it turned sharply in the last hours, ramming catastrophically into Cayo Costa Island, a mere 4 miles from our home, causing billions of dollars in property damage and the deaths of 148 of our Florida neighbors.

For Helene, therefore, we chose to prepare for the worst-case scenario.

Marianne gathered all the loose items outside the house, from potted plants and lawn chairs to garden hoses and our granddaughter's pool toys, and stowed them inside the house and garage, so that they would not be launched as missiles by 150 mph winds.

She filled all available containers, from plastic jugs to stainless steel thermoses, with tap water for drinking, and she also filled the tubs and sinks for cleaning or bathing, in anticipation of a power outage and shutdown of utilities.

We live on a canal connected to the Gulf, and my first job was to remove our boat from the water and anchor it on dry land.

Next, I used cross planks and wood screws to seal all three trap doors to the attic in our home, lest the hurricane pressure that can build there explode through the openings to rip apart the structure from the inside.

Because we added impact windows to our house and a reinforced steel roof and elevated our home to withstand a 10-foot surge, we made the decision to trust NOAA's forecast and stay here, rather than expose ourselves to potentially worse risks on Interstate 75 in a mass evacuation.

On Wednesday, with our generator gassed up and our phones fully charged, we monitored the storm's progress. By noon, Helene's path remained faithful to NOAA's forecast.

Had Helene made a surprise turn, I would have removed the quick-release blades on the three ceiling fans on our patio (after blades on our old fans spun and self-destructed in Ian's 150 mph winds) and cut open four of its 8-by-8 screens to allow the winds to blast through without dragging down the walls and roof, as happened when Ian struck our coastline.

But there was no turn by Helene.

We watched the water flood the dock and the wind bend the trees. By 4 p.m., the eye of the storm had passed 125 miles offshore.

Not as fortunate was Florida's Panhandle, along with Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia and the Carolinas, as Helene, fueled by the hyper-warm Gulf, made landfall as a Category 4 storm, causing [at least 107 deaths](#) and untold billions in property damage.

Still, thanks to the cutting-edge science of NOAA, from which the the Weather Channel and all other news services derive their forecasts, we don't have to suffer the same fate as our predecessors who perished by the thousands because of unpreparedness for historic storms, from the Great Galveston Hurricane in 1900 (8,000 deaths) to Katrina in 2005 (1,392 deaths).

Even as such super-storms seem to be increasing in strength and frequency, we remain hopeful for greater resiliency in the future, owing to more accurate forecasting of hurricanes'

paths and timelines. And to technological innovations in flood barriers, such as the remarkable portable Aqua Fence that kept Tampa General Hospital safe even as it was surrounded by a raging storm surge.

Every storm teaches hard lessons, and Marianne and I will look into budgeting for a similar barrier for a family residence.

For only time will tell when the next storm is headed our way.

David McGrath is an emeritus English professor at the College of DuPage and author of the newly released book "[Far Enough Away](#)," a collection of Chicagoland stories. Email him at mcgrathd@dupage.edu.

Submit a letter, of no more than 400 words, to the editor [here](#) or email letters@chicagotribune.com.