

Ottawans lend helping hand to hurricane victims

Emergency workers quick to come to colleague's aid

Sharon Stenhouse, *The Ottawa Citizen*

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Detective Phillip Weatherford had never met anyone from Ottawa. A tough police veteran in Gulfport, Mississippi, he spent his career helping others. But he and his wife, Debrah, consider themselves lucky to have met two Ottawa men, a firefighter and a police officer.

"They're all angels, honey, every one of them," Mrs. Weatherford said through her tears last week. "I fell in love with those guys."

Volunteer firefighter Harry Van Hofwegen, with the Ottawa Fire Department, and Ottawa police Const. Dave Stewart spent a week in Gulfport rebuilding the Weatherfords' house after it was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina last summer.

The family had been left with nothing after the hurricane. Their house was filled with water 1.5 metres deep and everything inside -- electrical wiring, appliances, carpeting and even the walls -- was left in ruin.

When Mr. Van Hofwegen and Const. Stewart heard about the Weatherfords, they jumped at the chance to help. The Ottawa men were joined by five RCMP officers from across Canada.

Andrew Cowan, a corporal with the RCMP in Victoria, learned of the Weatherfords through a sister chapter of the Fellowship of Christian Peace Officers, an organization with chapters across the United States and Canada. It was founded to provide support to peace officers -- police, customs agents, emergency workers and prison guards, for example -- who are in need.

Many police officers and other peace officers who lived in the path of the hurricane had seen their homes destroyed and lacked the insurance to cover the damage.

"We did this because it was something that they really couldn't do on their own," said Mr. Van Hofwegen, noting that Mr. Weatherford was about to retire on a small pension and his wife lost her job because of the hurricane.

The peace organization provided emergency supplies, raised funds for rebuilding and covered some of the expenses of the Canadians.

"We don't live in a flood zone, so we don't have flood insurance," explained Mrs. Weatherford. The only thing covered by insurance was the roof, because they did have wind insurance.

The Weatherfords' neighbourhood was hit hard.

"It was like a bomb had gone off," Mr. Van Hofwegen said last week. "There was just nothing there."

Now there is. Within a week of their arrival, the Weatherfords' house had new drywall and new insulation and the walls were ready to be painted. A shipment of windows, doors and locks arrived from churches in other states. The yard was cleared of debris.

"They did a fabulous job," said Mrs. Weatherford. The Weatherfords' house stands out on a street where the other homes are still in utter disrepair, she said. Piles of rubble on concrete slabs are all that remains of some.

Every time the Weatherfords visit their house -- which they should be able to move back into in April or May -- from their temporary dwelling in Alabama, they see their neighbours' homes and are reminded of the disaster.

But soon, at least, they will have a warm and dry home to return to.