

Stronger Than Ever

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Community leaders, servicemembers and residents in Bay County, Fla., are determined to rebuild their community better than ever, and celebrate the successes in between. Bay County's District 5 Commissioner Philip Griffitts remembers the day as a blur.

"It looked like a bomb went off. Our community had never experienced anything quite like this. This was something we'd never anticipated nor could have expected," Griffitts said.

For Griffitts, a third-generation Bay County resident, the destruction was hard to fathom. "This was something that the U.S. has only faced a couple of times in its history."

Hurricane Michael hit the Florida panhandle Oct. 10, 2018. Though the region is no stranger to hurricanes and tropical storms, Bay County was no match for the Category 5 storm. Much of the catastrophic damage was due to extreme winds and storm surge.

Panama City Manager Mark McQueen had only been in the job for two weeks when Hurricane Michael hit.

"We had about 90% of all homes and businesses damaged or destroyed," said McQueen. "We found ourselves in a total blackout. Power, water, sewer and communications were 100% destroyed. It was a very precarious situation."



Staff Sgt. Mahoney with her children Jamie (12), Caden (11) and Lacey (5) on the first day of their new school year. Photo submitted.

The storm rocked the military community, changing the lives of hundreds of servicemembers stationed at Tyndall Air Force Base and Naval Support Activity Panama City. The storm caused a devastating amount of destruction on Tyndall.

Staff Sgt. Stephanie Mahoney, an Airman Leadership School Instructor stationed at Tyndall since November 2010 lived in base housing and lost her home during Hurricane Michael.

“We walked inside and that’s when I found out that multiple windows had blown in. There was a lot of water damage. It was very heartbreaking to see,” Mahoney said. “The place that we called home, the place I had made a home for my children, it was literally ripped apart.”

She struggled for months to find a permanent home for herself and her children. On Jan. 21, months after her home was destroyed, she moved her family into a new home.

“I sat down with a calendar and started counting the days. I got up to 105, and it just kind of blew my mind that for 105 days I didn’t have an address to mail things to,” she said.

Resilience has defined Bay County's path forward.

Mahoney called upon the curriculum she taught to help get her through the hard times. "One of the lesson concepts we teach early on is warrior ethos. Warrior ethos means hardiness of spirit, that no matter how hard times are you have to stay tough, you have to keep going," Mahoney said. "That is what I have seen our servicemembers do, and it's what our community has done."

In the days following the storm, McQueen remembers neighbors helping neighbors and an outpouring of support, which he sees as a testament of the community's strength. "We saw unbelievable outreach of people helping each other dig out from their current situations," McQueen said. "It was military helping civilians, civilians helping military."

McQueen said Panama City's future is bright.

"We may find that at the end of the day, after all this is said and done, we'll look back and see that the event of the hurricane was actually a blessing. It has motivated people to make our community better and stronger."
