

Salvation Army serves small Hispanic community hit by Michael

By Donald Felice –

Nestled in the southwestern corner of the state of Georgia just over the Alabama and Florida state lines, you'll find Bainbridge. It was first settled as a small trading post in the late 18th century. Residents are proud of Bainbridge, and will quickly remind you it's the hometown of University of Georgia Football Head Coach Kirby Smart.



Life is fairly laid back in Bainbridge. But, that all changed when Michael arrived, hurling winds of 120 miles per hour down against the quiet little town.

“Bainbridge was never seen anything like this before,” said Maria Diaz, a resident since 1999. “The last time anything close to this happened here was back in 1851.”

Bearing testimony to Maria’s statement, countless 100-year-old-plus live oak trees, that once graced the town, are now strewn across streets and lawns, and lay toppled over homes and businesses.

A few miles south of town, and a stone’s throw from Tallahassee Highway, nearly 100 men, women and children huddled together inside the United Methodist Hispanic Mission seeking shelter from the rage of Hurricane Michael, not knowing the fate of their clustered trailer-homes just over the tree line. Their fear grew in intensity as the violent storm winds increased and pressed trees down to their breaking point. At the height of the storm, the little group of families huddled together in prayer for thirty minutes in the center of the chapel. At midnight, the power went out.

Local congregation leader, Jamie Gallaga, earlier pleaded with the little Hispanic community to seek shelter in the church. Much to Gallaga’s relief, they listened. Gallaga grew up on the Mexican Gulf Coast and shared his frightening personal experiences of what hurricane force winds could do. Although Gallaga is not an ordained pastor, its not important to the little Hispanic community. He took up care for them when the pastor assigned to the church was delayed by governmental red tape over a year ago, and they won’t forget his unfailing love and dedication to them.

“I’m glad they listened,” said Gallaga with tears in his eyes, “I can’t image what I would do if anything happened to one of these little ones,” he adds, as children laughed and chased each other inside of the chapel.

The women and children stay at the Hispanic Mission Church during the day while the men go back to their devastated neighborhood to do what repairs they can. One man lost his trailer-home where he and his five children were living. He lost his wife a few years ago, and now must maintain his strength for his family to make it through yet another tragedy.

Gallaga's stepson's house is destroyed—crushed under numerous fallen trees. And two trees crashed through Gallaga's home, too. "I'm not going to worry about my home or going back to work until the congregation is taken care of and none of them need to stay here anymore," Gallaga said.

Just then, a mobile kitchen unit from The Salvation Army Georgia Division, turned into the driveway of the church. Within a short time it's set up and ready to serve lunch.

Behind the serving window is 2016 Salvation Army Southern Territory Volunteer of the Year, Joe Johnson, now approaching 30 years of volunteer service.

"I love doing this," Johnson said, as a gaggle of pre-teen girls skip up to the canteen followed closely by their moms and younger siblings. "Hot dogs!" they said.

"I don't have words to express how much it means for you to help us like this," Gallaga said.

"That's what we do—helping people in their time of need," Johnson said. "We're with you, and we won't leave Bainbridge, or the little Hispanic Mission, either, until all in need are served and safe."