

## ‘Goin’ back to Daytona, goin’ back with my girl ... ‘

Travelling two days to help clean up and fix up poor people’s hurricane-damaged houses is not necessarily a joy ride. But for Donna and me, accompanying my brother and sister-in-law on their second Volunteers in Mission trip to Daytona Beach, Florida, was a pleasure. We joined an experienced team from the Altoona District of the Susquehanna Conference, most of whom were returning to a county-wide recovery project they’d assisted last April.



We bunked halfway the night of Jan. 26 at the Chestnut Street United Methodist Church in Lumberton, NC – returning there on Groundhog Day evening on the homeward leg. In Volusia County, FL, our base was the tiny Union Congregational Church in Holly Hill, an enclave of Daytona Beach where I had lived from 1991-98 during my 14 years as a copy editor for the *Daytona Beach News-Journal*. Donna and I met in the summer of 1992, and our limited free time allowed us to look over the changes two decades make to a community where she had administered the nursing school at Daytona Beach Community College for seven years and where her son finished high school.

Donna partnered with Sue Shuey of Centenary UMC, Steelton PA, to feed the crew a daily hot breakfast and substantial dinner. We all bagged our lunches from supplies Sue and Donna laid out, and we were treated to a tasty Friday night feast at a crowded local seafood restaurant. All of this occurred amid a mixture of rain, sun, wind, chill and cheerful companionship while our homefolk in Central Pennsylvania endured the Polar Vortex.

Team leader Joy Shields and the two local contractors who mentored us split us into two work groups to take on three properties. I and my brother, Gene, spent all four and a half days insulating and dry-walling all but two tiny, occupied bedrooms of a small concrete block house that had been damaged, apparently, by backed-up sewage during flooding from Hurricane Irma in 2017. How the seven (or more) occupants coped since that Daytona disaster puzzled the eight or nine of us who tried to restore livability there. It will take another team and another week to finish what we started, and that won’t happen until early March, probably.

Joy joined five others doing some roof and interior work – including a back-door ramp with hand rail for a New Smyrna Beach man who needs a wheelchair to get around. Their job largely finished after three days, most of that group got a good start on installing soffit and fascia on a house in Ormond Beach that had had its roof forcibly removed by a tornado, also in 2017. That’s where a photographer and reporter from *The News-Journal* caught up with Joy, my sister-in-law Sandy Davis and others to do a two-page feature report for the Feb. 2 edition. Until I visited a few old colleagues at the paper early in the week, local folks had been unaware this kind of charity still was being done, two years since Irma and three since Hurricane Matthew flooded the region.

A gesture by the Altoona VIM team is to present each homeowner (and also the contractors) with a signed blanket quilt, and it was obvious the recipients were touched. Most of us found moments during the week to chat with those folks, who expressed deep gratitude for both the repair work and for the neighborliness. One of our team spends much of his spare time assembling small crosses of cut nails, to be worn around the neck. He gave fistfuls to each of us with the recommendation that we pass ‘em on. Another of the team boldly accosted almost every person in sight at our site and shared the love of Jesus symbolized by that little emblem of acceptance. Sometimes tears appeared.

For Donna and me, it was our second VIM experience as a couple, although she had done several as a single mom in the 1980s and ‘90s. Sue, a retired pediatric nurse, was on her 59<sup>th</sup> such mission, all in food service. Others spoke of having dozens under their belts, many of them as a unit representing the Mission Central Hub in Altoona.

This accounting is no news to the many in Christ Church – and those of other churches, other denominations, other faith-based organizations – who have learned the satisfaction of helping our fellow humans caught in desperate straits. It is, however, an encouragement to them to keep it up -- and to more of us to step up. Always there are volunteers with skills to take on the challenges on the job; a skill set is secondary to a willing heart. Look at me: I had 50 years of dry-walling experience, I shared with the team meeting that first night. I’d done it once in 1968.