

# The Pulse

“When you get home and somebody asks how it was, the first thing that comes out of my mouth is, ‘I will go back tomorrow if you ask me to.’”

NATINA DUDLEY

## The Aftermath

### Nurses Respond to Recent Natural Disasters

BY LIBBY ZAY

A few days after Hurricane Harvey made landfall in August, the streets around Francis Minguez’s Houston suburb remained underwater. Minguez, BSN, RN, CPN, a student in UMSON’s Nursing Informatics master’s specialty who takes classes online, had ridden out the worst of the hurricane at home and had missed a day of work due to impassable roads.

Inspired by the people he saw helping others on TV – and determined to relieve his colleagues at Texas Children’s Hospital The Woodlands – Minguez surveyed the area, followed the news bulletins, and mapped an alternate route to the hospital. He even planned emergency exits in case he needed to turn back.

“I told my manager, ‘I will be there. I can’t guarantee I’ll get there before my shift usually starts, but I’ll get there,’” Minguez recalls.

Typically, it takes Minguez about 15 minutes to commute to his job as a staff nurse; that day, it took him more than two hours. “It was like driving through a swamp,” he says.

Once at the hospital, Minguez says, it was “amazing to see” the nurses’ teamwork. The hospital had been open for less than six months, but after the hurricane, the staff was working together “like we knew each other for a long, long time,” he says.

Though he lives in Maryland, James Gannon, MS ’08, RN, CEN, also found himself in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. Gannon, an assistant nurse manager at Sinai Hospital in Baltimore and an adjunct instructor at UMSON, is a member of the Department of Health and Human Services’ MD-1 Disaster Medical Assistance Team, and the hurricane is what he considers his first



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true disaster deployment. Up until that point, his only other assignment was filling in at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s call center in Atlanta during the West African Ebola virus epidemic in 2015.

“It was pretty apparent at the beginning that Hurricane Harvey was going to be a bigger event than what we normally see,” says Gannon, who was deployed to Silsbee, Texas. “It was an area that desperately needed assistance.” The two main hospitals in the nearby city of Beaumont were evacuated and shut down due to water and power issues, and because of a washed-out bridge, the closest hospital was more than a four-hour drive away.

Gannon and other volunteers set up a field hospital at Silsbee High School and had it operational in about four hours. Over the next few days, they saw about 500 patients and did everything from administer tetanus shots and treat rashes to revive someone who had a serious

**A trailer park flooded by Hurricane Harvey in Rose City, Texas, in September 2017**

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TERRIE GORDON

heart attack and respond to a person who had been electrocuted during rescue efforts.

“It was a truly amazing and humbling experience,” Gannon says. “As much as I enjoy doing that type of work, I hope I don’t get called to do it too often.”

Natina Dudley, MS, BSN ’95, RN, was deployed not only to Texas to help after Hurricane Harvey, but also to San Juan, Puerto Rico, after

their own loss of property or, in some cases, loss of life.

“You see the whole range of life to death,” Dudley says. “You are working all of these shifts in a row, and you are exhausted by the end of it because you are not sleeping in your normal bed, your sleep pattern is totally destroyed, you’re not eating well, and you are working in an unfamiliar area. But when you get home and somebody asks how it was,

paramedic firefighter son worked to contain the fire for five days without a break. When Gordon arrived, she found that the American Red Cross had set up an evacuation center at a fairground. They were in need of nurses, so she volunteered to help.

After returning home, Gordon received a call from the Sacramento Medical Reserve Corps asking if she could deploy immediately. She went back to Napa Valley and worked three 12-hour shifts in an evacuation center medical unit set up in a gymnasium, mostly assisting the elderly. “Their medical needs revolved around lost medications, breathing treatments, and anxiety,” she says.

Aside from the 30 seconds or so when everyone erupted into song to wish a 93-year-old woman a happy birthday, Gordon says the mood was very somber. “There wasn’t crying and screaming and yelling, it was just quiet – I would use the word introspective,” she says. “A lot of them had lost everything. Even today, you go up there and what you see are a lot of charred lots with ‘for sale’ signs on them. It’s a real tragedy; it’s heartbreaking.”

Gordon recently started a new position as a clinical nurse informatics specialist at the University of California, Davis – and she plans to continue volunteering whenever she is called to duty.

“My goal is to get far more involved on the level of planning before a disaster,” she says. “So that when it does happen, things fall into place. So we know where people go, where animals go, where resources go, where money goes, where clothing goes. On the other hand, though, I hope there are no more disasters.” ♣



JUSTIN GAMBLE

A firefighter on the front lines of the October wildfires in Napa Valley, California

Hurricane Maria caused catastrophic damage to the island in September. Dudley lives in Seattle and volunteers for the Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), where she works as a critical care nurse and educator.

“We are deployed for two-week rotations and never know exactly what we are walking into,” Dudley explains. In both places, she helped provide staffing coverage to area VAs so local nurses could deal with

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Terrie Gordon, MS ’82, BSN ’74, didn’t wait for deployment to jump into action during the Northern California wildfires in October. As she watched houses and entire neighborhoods burn on TV from her own home in Sacramento, she decided to head to Napa Valley to see how she could help.

“As I was driving to Napa, everyone was driving in the opposite direction,” recalls Gordon, whose