

South Miami news

NOVEMBER 2 - 8, 2010

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Epiphany School students conduct hurricane exercise

BY LEE STEPHENS

As HurriVac computer images of Category 3 Hurricane Monica got closer to South Florida's coast, Mayor Gabriel Figueredo barked orders to his fellow Epiphany Catholic School students over the telephone.

A fire in an evacuation center needed to be extinguished and 1,000 people relocated to other evac centers in the area — right away.

Figueredo and Emergency Management directors Daniela Clavijo and Carolina Ortega were shouldering the responsibility to supervise Emergency Support Functions (ESFs in emergency management parlance) managed by their classmates — fire-fighting, transportation, law enforcement, urban search and rescue, health and medical, food and water, and mass care, to name some — to ensure that the dispossessed people were properly relocated to other shelters and safe from the approaching storm.

"Put the fire out first," Figueredo ordered firefighters. "Then start removing the people," he directed those in charge of transportation.

As soon as the fire in the evacuation center was resolved, a gasoline truck overturned on a major evacuation route, leaving thousands of motorists stranded. Gas from the truck was spilling all over the road and motorists were overheated and thirsty with tempers flaring. Again, Mayor Figueredo had to depend on his ESFs to resolve this perilous situation.

"We need to remove the truck, contain the spill and get bottled water out to these people as soon as possible," he demanded. "Get Hazardous Materials, Resource Management and Mass Care on the phone. We need to move fast."

After Monica's passage, it got even worse.

The students faced equally challenging emergencies such as several hundred senior citizens stranded on an island by a washed-out Intracoastal bridge. "We've



John Farach (left) and Christopher Diaz-Silveira review their ESF resources during a challenge at the Miami-Dade EOC exercise.

sent boats, helicopters and anything we can," Figueredo said.

In the meantime, a hospital was overcrowded with storm victims, medical resources virtually exhausted and basic water and food provisions also were depleted. The hospital was on auxiliary power, making it difficult to perform basic surgical procedures. Also, parts of the city were virtually underwater from rain and storm surge, with people and their pets perilously stranded on rooftops and dangling from trees.

Eighty students spent Tuesday morning, Oct. 12, at the Miami-Dade County Office of Emergency Management participating in a special hurricane preparedness exercise called StormZone, a Miami-based non-profit program where they planned for and recovered from Category 3 Hurricane Monica.

StormZone, sponsored by Turnberry Bank and the American Red Cross, is a free online hurricane science education and preparedness program offered to public and private schools. The program specifically helps students understand the importance of advance preparation when confronted with a natural disaster

such as a hurricane. For five years, StormZone has been taught in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach County schools throughout hurricane season, which ends Nov. 30.

At the conclusion of the exercise, student Mayor Figueredo conducted a press conference assisted by public information coordinators Sebastian Abarca and Sarah Medina to inform student reporters on preparedness measures that were taken before the storm and recovery efforts after its passage.

The first question asked was, "Were any lives lost?"

"No," answered a relieved Figueredo.

"Through this interactive exercise, students learn about emergency management, make the decisions necessary to respond to a disaster in their community and develop a recovery plan," said Bay Proby, StormZone director. "This classroom experience also lets students learn about the importance of individual responsibility, organizational collaboration and project management skills when confronted with a hurricane."

For more information about StormZone, visit online at <www.stormzone.us>.