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School kids weather a fake storm

Forty middle school students participated in a hurricane simulation at the Broward County Emergency Operations Center.

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MARSHA HALPER / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

MANNING THE PHONES: New River Middle School seventh-grader Tyler Voet of Fort Lauderdale takes an emergency call during an exercise simulating a Category 3 hurricane.

As computer images of Category 3 Hurricane Jamie spiraled over South Florida on wall monitors, Chelsea Currie snatched up the phone.

She had just finished securing food for senior citizens stranded by a washed-out Intracoastal bridge when she learned that flooding had left other residents stuck on rooftops.

Yanking the receiver to the edge of her desk, she called Mayor Oscar Miranda, demanding that he send a van full of supplies to shelters right away.

"We've sent boats, helicopters and anything we can," the mayor said at a hastily called news conference. "I know some people are out there waiting, and we're going to get to you."

Chelsea and Oscar, both 13, were on a middle school field trip Thursday to the Broward County Emergency Operations Center in Plantation, taking part in a hurricane simulation with about 40 other students from Crystal Lake and New River middle schools.

As the sun shone and a gentle breeze tickled the palm trees outside, the kids inside paced back and forth, responding to reports of roads underwater and buildings ripped apart by 130-mph winds with gusts up to 155 mph.

Oscar, of Hollywood, worked with a co-mayor from Crystal Lake Middle School in Pompano Beach.

They juggled phone calls, approving and rejecting proposals from students acting as representatives of public works departments, fire departments, and search-and-rescue teams.

Mayor Oscar said he does not plan to run for office in the future. But he did find a new respect for what goes on behind the scenes in a crisis, he said.

"A lot of people complain during hurricanes," Oscar said. "But the [people at the Emergency Operations Center] have a really hard job."

The students ran through scenarios designed to teach them about hurricane planning, preparation, response and recovery. Similar sessions are in the works for select Miami-Dade and Palm Beach County students, also.

"You can tell they feel really important," said Elizabeth Moller, who brought her seventh-grade science class from New River Middle School in Fort Lauderdale.

The students used the same equipment and work space that government officials use in times of crisis.

At the end of the session, students playing journalists took the mayors and other officials into a briefing room for the press conference -- the same one where Oscar sought to reassure stranded residents. The room was realistically equipped with malfunctioning microphones.

Most field trips focus on learning about nature, but this was a chance for the youth to develop skills in technology and communications, said Tracy Rice, who was with her eighth-grade class from Crystal Lake Middle School.

For Crystal Lake student Kelsey Quanstrom, 13, of Tamarac, the simulation was a chance to try out a potential career. Real-life meteorologist Erik Salna helped her learn to read the graphs and charts that help experts predict where storms will hit.

Although she had to overcome a little stage fright on Thursday while announcing storm updates, Kelsey said the experience reinforced her interest in meteorology.

"I did weather on the school news channel," Kelsey said. "But I don't know if that counts as meteorology after this."