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Hurricane Harvey: Keeping Sane During Disaster

In dry areas of Houston, bars and restaurants are reopening to provide food, shelter and a little bit of normalcy



Much of Houston is under water - but in some dry patches, residents are coming together to find a bit of normalcy. Adrees Latif/Reuters

By **Brittanie Shev**

August 30, 2017

It started with a Facebook event invite: "Safe at Griff's"

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"Getting affiliated with one of the local volunteer agencies that are established is really crucial," NVOAD's Gregory Forrester says



"Montrose is OK. For now at least," the description read. As the rains got steadily worse and the full reality of what Houston was to face in the coming days came into view, a group of friends decided to gather in one of the city's few unflooded neighborhoods to blow off some steam, eat some hot food and regroup before getting back to volunteer work.

In the Montrose – a historic neighborhood just south of Downtown, long known for its vibrant arts and gay communities and quirky counter-culture nightlife – residents were mostly safe from the flood. But the steady rising of Buffalo Bayou a mile away meant that many of them were trapped in the neighborhood. No way to work. No way to buy things to donate.

Houston is no stranger to severe weather. By Thursday of last week, lines of cars were already forming at grocery stores, as people stocked up on water and non-perishables. Photos of empty shelves inundated social media. By Friday, restaurants and other businesses were closing early to allow their staff time to prepare for the storm. Harvey made landfall in Rockport, Texas, just north of Corpus Christi, that night. It was a Category 4 storm. In Houston, the rains were light until Saturday night, when spectacular lightning and heavy storms deluged the region.

But on Sunday morning, residents of the nation's fourth-largest city woke up to intense flooding that would continue for days. The entire city had been shut down for 48 hours already, and there was no end in sight. So when Khrys Fisher found out that Griff's was open, she and a group of friends decided to make the Facebook event for that afternoon.

According to [VisitHouston](#), Houstonians dine out more than residents of any other city in the United States – an average of four nights a week. This city is a melting pot of many different cultures, but we're still in the South – we seek comfort and community in food. [Griff's](#), like many of the long-running bars and restaurants in the Montrose, has a devoted cadre of regulars. Opened in 1965, it's a sports bar, but it is so much more. It's charity crawfish boils in the spring draw large crowds, and the annual Saint Patrick's Day party takes up an entire block on what is otherwise a residential street. It is a dive – in the most loving sense of the word – and like most dives, it is dark, slightly shabby and utterly comforting. With most of Houston's other restaurants and grocery stores closed, there was no place else to go.

"I needed things to feel normal," says one local. "For just a little bit before shit got a whole lot worse."

"Honestly, it was a play on everybody marking themselves 'safe' on Facebook," Fisher says. "We were just gonna mark ourselves safe at Griffs. We knew it was bad outside where we were, we knew it was

gonna get worse, but we still kinda didn't know what our fate was. But for that moment we were safe."

"I needed people," she continues. "I needed to be out of my house. I needed things to feel normal – for just a little bit before shit got a whole lot worse."

The mood wasn't celebratory. More like grateful. Griff's was working with a limited staff – just three employees – but no one seemed to mind. The Astros game against the Angels was on the bar's large projection screen, hot food was being served and the drinks were flowing as quickly as they could be poured.

"The staff, they kicked ass," Fisher says. "Griff's always does a Jello shot when the Astros score, and sure enough, they had Jello shots at the ready. It was like a regular day there, just that they were short staffed, and everybody there seemed to understand. They had one guy in the kitchen, they had one behind the bar – they literally had three people running the place. And they didn't give a shit, they were having a good time too. They just seemed happy to have a little bit of normalcy themselves."

On Monday night, it was a similar scene at Rudyards, a long-running pub and punk music venue lovingly known as "The Living Room of the Montrose." At 7:30 p.m., a line had formed out the door for those waiting for beer. By 8, the kitchen was so swamped that it had to shut down for an hour to catch up on orders. When it finally re-opened, owner Lelia Rodgers was serving their famous "Rudz burgers" nude and on paper plates. They'd run out of both buns and dishes.

Members of the Democratic Socialists of Houston had gathered after a day of volunteering at the George R. Brown Convention Center, the staging area and makeshift shelter that is currently housing more than 9,000 flood victims. As each new face walked in the door at Rudz, the

crowd would erupt in jubilant applause. A familiar face. An acknowledgment that someone was safe.

For service industry professionals – of which there are many in Houston – each day without work meant a day without wages. It's understandable that staff wanted to get back as soon as possible. And it's human instinct to want to provide nourishment for people in times of upheaval. As higher-elevation neighborhoods across Houston formed islands in the storm, bars and restaurants became staging areas for donation drop-offs. At Down House Restaurant, in a neighborhood north of Buffalo Bayou fittingly called the Heights, the entire floor was covered with material donations by Monday afternoon.

Back in the Montrose, at Southside Espresso, two employees who live across the street texted owner Sean Marshall to see if they could open the wine bar and coffee shop on Monday afternoon.

"Our regulars were coming in kind of to check on each other," says one coffee-shop owner.

"I didn't know what the street looked like so they sent me pictures and it was dry. We only got a little bit of water in the front door thankfully, so they were able to go in and mop up and open up," Marshall says. "At Southside, we're pretty small – we don't have a kitchen but we do make stuff like flatbread pizzas. People were looking for prepared food, mostly because some people lost power."

On Tuesday the rain began to subside, and the coffee shop was able to open at about 8 a.m. and operate with a more normal-sized staff, even though some employees were still stuck in flooded areas.

“Our regulars were coming in kind of to check on each other. They’re all showing back up to get a cup of coffee and get out of the house, because everybody’s been locked down for the weekend and goin’ a little stir-crazy,” Marshall says. “When you see a crowd of people together, it feels normal. It’s nice to know people are safe.”

Also on Tuesday, Fisher was finally able to leave her neighborhood to help with recovery for friends who’d received more than five feet of water in their home. As the rebuilding effort begins, the work of restaurant and bar professionals will become even more important. It’s something Marshall is already aware of.

“We sold a lot of coffee today,” Marshall says. “Also, one of our wine reps came by. She was picking up food from all her vendors – she picked up coffee from us to take to the George R. Brown to take to the first responders, so that was kinda cool. We were able to get some coffee to them.”

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