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Turkey Creek residents rescue their own

By TRACY DASH

tadash@sunherald.com

GULFPORT - Residents of Turkey Creek say they live among heroes. Not the comic-book kind like Spider-Man or Superman, but real men who risked their lives to save others.

Although thousands of South Mississippians heeded warnings to evacuate in the days before Hurricane Katrina, many stayed, believing they would be safe from her wrath.

Ercill Idom and her family were among those who remained. After all, she had stayed in her wood-frame home on Idom Street, just off Rippy Road, for other storms and was fine. Her feeling of safety vanished, though, when she saw flood waters buckle her new hardwood floors.

Seven men, young and not so young, walked in muddy, chest-deep, water at times to rescue at least four families from the flood, including two small children and an elderly woman. Winds topping 100 mph slammed against them, spraying rain water in their faces. They made their way around downed power lines and tried to avoid flying debris.

"You couldn't walk," said Joshua McLaurin, one of the rescuers. "There were white caps."

The close-knit community of Turkey Creek is made up of relatives and friends who have known each other for years. The houses that line Rippy Road and streets that branch off the main street are mostly wood-frame, one-story dwellings.

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DaShawn Thompson, left, Joshua McLaurin and Cedric Stewart helped rescue people from homes off of Rippy Road during Hurricane Katrina.

The area often has street flooding when the creek backs up, but residents said they don't recall the area getting that much water in the past.

Many of the homes that flooded Aug. 29 were empty last week, with some uninhabitable. Mattresses, furniture, wet carpet and other debris now sit on the curb in front of nearly every home.

McLaurin, his wife and 2-year-old planned to leave town for the storm, but decided to stay because his in-laws refused to leave. His mother-in-law is Idom, with whom he and his family lived.

The Idoms lost their home and are living with Thompson and his mother. McLaurin and his wife lost everything and live elsewhere.

McLaurin joined Dashawn Thompson, his cousin by marriage, who led the rescue. Idom said she and her husband are disabled and would have drowned if Thompson, who lives on Rippy Road, didn't check on them.

Thompson said he realized early during the storm that the water was quickly rising and knew that residents behind Mt. Pleasant United Methodist Church had stayed, including Idom, his aunt.

"It was out of bravery," Idom said.

Five other men joined the effort, stopping at every house in the area that looked occupied. The other men include Jerry Darden, Cedric Stewart, Delbert Bester, Donnie Smith and Hurley Johnson.

The men sometimes worked together and branched off into groups at other times.

Gulfport Mayor Brent Warr and President Bush have recognized Darden for his efforts, but the Gulfport city employee said the others deserve praise as well.

"I was not alone," said Darden, whose home was damaged.

Darden, McLaurin and Thompson said they were scared, but did what they had to do. Darden said he survived by thinking about his wife. Thompson said his son "kept me going."

At one point during the rescue, the men found a small boat that they used to save an elderly woman. None of the men know her name and believe she is in her 80s. They found her and her family in their garage.

"She was on top of a car and the water was coming up," Thompson said.

Darden said they found a couple standing in chest-deep water inside their home on Idom Street. The parents held their infant in their arms, he said.

Another family the men found refused to leave their flooded home. Darden said they went back to check on them after the storm and found them safe.

The men brought some people to a house on Rippy Road that sits on high ground and others to the church, which is made of cinder block and brick and has four steps leading to the front door.

"The people were frantic at first," McLaurin said, "but relieved when we arrived."

Gulfport Sun Herald Newspaper story.

<http://www.dfw.com/mld/dfw/news/weather/hurricanes/12742484.htm>