

## Testimony: The Day After

I am founder of the Tallahassee Food Network based in Tallahassee and covering coastal and rural Georgia and Florida. I am also a graduated fellow of the New School, on various environmental justice advisory boards and teams in the neighborhood, local and national arenas. During the week of September 23, 2024, Hurricane Helene swept through and left some damage and devastation in our southeast communities and personally I have been negatively impacted. After the hurricane has been hard for many and for me, and it is hard for me to tell my story, my experience because I am so used to asking others to tell me their story and to finding ways to help others, so, this is hard and different for me to tell my story, but let me try. This is my experience. When a disaster is thought of, lots of focus is on preparation and recovery which are very important parts of disaster. I was in Savannah, Georgia when the Hurricane came, and it hit our community bad. Firstly, I made it safely through the storm and was not harmed physically by the storm, I realize that things could be worse, and so I am giving thanks that I am still here. I was without power for almost 3 days and was impacted in two major ways.

1. First, the day after when I saw the physical damage of the hurricane, I was more than overwhelmed. On the day after, I opened the door to see outside and what had happened and saw what I did not think or imagine I would see and what I had never experienced before. There were trees down in the back and front yards, there was large pieces of debris all over the porch, the car, and the street, the whole fence in the front of the house was destroyed, screens were missing from the windows, (I still don't know where they went to), pieces of the roof were on the ground, there was a big hole in the roof from a fallen tree. It was so much to see at one time, and I did feel overwhelmed, and was moved to go back in the house where I did not talk or return calls until 2 days after because of the shock of seeing so many things at one time. I just could not talk.
2. Second, on the day after, my experience was of shock, and a sense of loss and feeling alone, I am not sure how to totally explain it, but it was like a kind of feeling in my heart or chest. It was a blow; I was hurt by this traumatic experience. I did not realize until after speaking and sharing my feelings with a sister friend of mine, that I probably had a trauma, emotional or panic attack which came from just the sheer feeling of being overwhelmed. It is not about the house; it is about people. I am hurt and I know others are. I still do not rest well.

What is helping me to work through this trauma is the love from people – family members and friends in different parts of the country. Not only love but the genuine expression of caring that is coming in different ways. When I realized that this was not just my experience, I knew that I had to keep it moving as I go through healing from this experience. It is true, I realized that as I reengaged with community members and the Tallahassee resiliency team, they were having the same experience as I was. I shared my experience and shared that we must include approaches for the psychological impacts of a weather disaster that do not end just because the storm is over. I am realizing that I am not alone. That this level of experience does not go away overnight and takes some time to reconcile. I am lucky because I do have some beautiful people whom I trust and can talk with but many of our people who experience this level of impact do not have that safety net. Just yesterday on my morning walk I saw a neighbor sitting in a car and stopped to make sure she was okay. She was an elder in her 70s. She told me that she was not okay and that she was still without power and just wanted to get out of the house and this was why she was sitting there. She was noticeably nervous and shaking and needed to talk, and I could immediately identify with this because I went through it myself. I stayed with her for over 30 minutes letting her talk and offering her to charge her phone and have a meal with me.

I know there is more to my story, but for now, this is my experience from Hurricane Helene which hit the southeast the week of September 23, 2024, and I continue to recover.