

The Augusta Chronicle

COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: 'Like a bomb went off' is how Campbell describes Helene's devastation

Campbell Vaughn Columnist

Published 4:03 a.m. ET Oct. 4, 2024 | Updated 4:03 a.m. ET Oct. 4, 2024

When we watch tragedies in other places in the world, it is sure easy to remove yourself from the pain and destruction when you are not personally invested.

And then the rains came on Thursday, followed by the winds on Friday, and now we won't ever forget.

I don't know how many times I have used the term, "It is like a bomb went off," as a response from kind people outside of our region asking me, "How are things in Augusta?"

I picked up my son from school last Thursday around 3 p.m. Right before I left my house, I poured out my rain gauge that was completely full at 5 inches. On the way home, we rode around town watching water come over the banks of Rae's Creek like it was a river in Colorado during a spring snow melt. We got back to the house and had 2 more inches of precipitation in the rain gauge. That brings the total to 7 inches in less than 12 hours.

The houses at the end of the street had water coming around them like they were little islands on the most famous creek in the South. Kids were playing on the edges of the water like it was just another nice afternoon after a bunch of rain. Friday morning, I had 4 more inches for a total of 11 inches in 22 hours.

Who would have thought we were going to experience what happened early Friday morning? The pinecones and limbs sounded like they were being shot out of a howitzer. Being unable to sleep, I stood by the front window watching trees contort like I know they are not supposed to do. And then I watched the first 120-foot pine tree come down. The first pine took out everything in front of it and the top landed about 25 feet from my front door. Then one by

one, through the front window, I could see the neighbor across the street lose one after the other until I couldn't watch anymore.

When we got up to assess, the destruction was unbelievable. And it wasn't just unbelievable what happened on my street, it was on every street all over town. These trees weren't snapped in half, they were uprooted with root masses 12 to 15 feet tall. Houses crushed. Cars crushed. People trapped in their homes. And multiple people killed by this terrible Helene.

Riding around town, it is hard to believe that there are enough people, chainsaws, cranes, skid-steers, and dump trailers to make a dent in the sheer volume of debris that is lining the streets and in yards. But somehow, they are making progress through all this wreckage. This is the 2014 Ice Storm times 10. There are neighborhoods with one or two trees on every third house. And a bunch of these houses are most likely totaled.

I have taken multiple classes over the years from some fantastic professors in UGA's Warnell School of Forestry. One of the most interesting ones that I did was Dr. Kim Coder's presentation on how trees are damaged during storms. There are a lot of complicated formulas that we discussed, but the gist of what I took away from the talk is that it is more about the force in terms of pounds per square foot than the wind itself. If a tree is full in its canopy, the more resistance it must endure. When the wind picks up, the force gets so much stronger. When the wind hits 55 mph, a tree might be at its most vulnerable. Add that to totally saturated soil, and a super destructive Helene was able to do her worst.

It is going to take a long time for us to get over this mess. The loss of life throughout our area, through our state and potential massive loss of lives in North Carolina, Tennessee, and South Carolina from the Helene floods has me wanting to put bad weather on hiatus for a long while. Stay kind to one another because we are all in this together.

