

HURRICANE GEORGES

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SARASOTA COUNTY -- The eye of Hurricane Georges was on top of Tony and Mary Beth Mediavilla's Puerto Rican resort village in September 1998, and the couple was hoping against hope that the worst was over. Georges' first assault had twisted some of the storm shutters on their glass-encased home, and knocked over a few trees. But at that point there was a surreal calm surrounding the couple's newly purchased 3,200-square-foot home. Tony, now a 68-year-old retired Marine lieutenant colonel, and Mary Beth, a 61-year-old housewife, knew they had an uncanny ability to attract hurricanes -- Georges was the fifth one they'd faced in four years.

They had sailed the Caribbean on a 40-foot yacht for six years before buying the condo in Tony's hometown of Humacao, on a bluff overlooking the Caribbean. In 1995, when the Mediavillas called a sailboat home, Hurricanes Felix, Iris, Luis, and Marilyn chased them from place to place in the eastern Caribbean. Weeks after Georges struck their condo in Puerto Rico, they moved to North Carolina, and one year later Hurricane Dennis flooded them out twice. It came ashore, and then went back to sea only to return and hit the coast again near New Bern. Two weeks later, Hurricane Floyd hit them.

When the couple moved to Sarasota County two years ago, they bought a house miles from the Gulf of Mexico, built with hurricanes in mind. "Eventually, I believe, one of these hurricanes is going to find Sarasota," said Tony, echoing the predictions of hurricane experts. "It's not if, but when, it hits."

As Georges' eye passed over Humacao in 1998, the couple, who now live in Sarasota County, stepped outside to discover minimal damage had been done to their home. Tony and Mary Beth went back inside to check on their storm preparations, knowing they still had the other half of Georges to contend with.

The eye wall returned. In the air rose a fury that Georges hadn't yet unleashed. Winds topped 200 mph. Storm shutters protecting the 32 sliding glass doors began to shake. Some of the shutters gave way and the giant glass doors twisted sideways in their frames, allowing the winds to roar through the house. Howling winds, flying glass, and rising water chased the couple upstairs to the bedroom, where it was safer. They shut the heavy, wooden bedroom door and set the deadbolt. Boom! The garage door, reinforced with steel bars on the outside and vehicles parked against it on the inside, bent in half. The rush of air blew through the garage, through the foyer

and up the stairs; where it blew open the bedroom door, twisting the metal deadbolt like a Cheez Doodle. The couple ran to the last place that was safe: their bedroom closet.

"Our stay in the closet during Hurricane Georges was the scariest place I've ever been in my life," said Tony, who is a combat veteran of the Vietnam War. "It's hard to really understand what the forces of nature are unless you're someone who has gone through it."

They stood in the closet -- there wasn't room to sit or lie down -- for six hours. They heard glass break. They heard the metal garage door scraping against the metal hoods of their cars. They heard dull thuds every time something flying through the air hit the exterior of the house. The winds blew a heavy armoire across the bedroom, like in a horror movie where demons move furniture with invisible hands. Mary Beth cried softly. She was scared the house was being destroyed; Tony was thinking they would both be killed. "The wind was awful. It was a constant, constant thing like it would never end," Mary Beth said. "It was very frightening."

In terms of hurricane preparedness, the Mediavillas had done everything right. They had storm shutters. They stocked up on enough food, batteries, and water to last 10 days. They had a generator. Nevertheless, Hurricane Georges caused \$40,000 in damage to their villa. According to the National Hurricane Center, Georges killed 602 people and caused nearly \$6 billion worth of damage in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the southern United States. The Mediavillas shared their survival story just before the start of the 2003 hurricane season to let others know that, even with proper planning, a tropical cyclone can pose a real danger -- and scare you nearly to death.

"Whenever the winds get over 30 miles per hour I start to get nervous. I tremble," Mary Beth said. "I don't know how anybody can go through that and not be affected by a strong wind."

The name of their 40-sailboat is "Liberty", presently owned by Fred and Donna. In 1998, they were still wintering in Puerto Rico and the boat was on the hard less than 100 yards away from the previous owner's resort in Palmas de Mar boatyard. There was no damage to Liberty; however 20 other boats in the same boatyard were totally destroyed in the Marina. "It must have been bitter irony to Tony and Mary Beth," thinks Fred and, "This close call drove us to discover Trinidad & Tobago."

Update: Active: Easy Lady: They are back in Curacao after a harrowing night trying to go to Ill de Vache. ... wind was 40 knots and 3 meter seas...BUT... the gear box was hot in neutral...and the only way to get it to cool was put it in reverse....not good on the prop....their auto pilot went out...(recently FIXED for #280USD) out.... when they started the engine...it stopped the first time. they could go in forward, so turned around and headed back to Curacao to get the gear box fixed...AGAIN!!! Curacao Marine Services, the boatyard there is extremely efficient. They do the best bottom job ever seen and in a very minimal

time. They were at the dock to meet the boat when they arrived.