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SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

‘We’re building back’

A resident of Seaside, artist Paul Brent and his wife Lara own a gallery in Panama City, Florida, where they also have a home and property. They are cleaning up debris from Hurricane Michael, a devastating storm that left more than 20 dead in its wake. The gallery is closed until further notice. We spoke to Paul via phone as he worked to rebuild his gallery and home in the storm’s aftermath.

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Q: Where were you when the hurricane hit?

Brent: We were still in Seaside for the hurricane. We left on the 18th (of October), almost a week after the hurricane hit. We arrived in Florida and had to stay in our Panama City Beach condo. The power came on this past Friday and we have now moved to our primary residence in Panama City. We moved the art from our gallery to our residence even though there was no power. At least it was dry. That stopped any mold growing on damp surfaces. Friends of ours whose home was totally uninhabitable are now in the condo.

Q: Can you describe what the region looks like?

Brent: Downtown Panama City and the major commercial corridors were hit badly with missing roofs and blown-out windows. Large metal buildings were especially hit, like warehouses and boat storage facilities. Marinas and church after church were destroyed. Residential areas that had oaks and large pines received major roof damage with trunks and limbs making holes, sometimes cutting buildings in two. Every roof has a blue tarp on it. Many people called it a war zone. Farther east, complete structures were wiped out.



R.J. MARX

Q: Where is your gallery and how did it make out?

Brent: It’s in the downtown area very close to the water. My studio was on the second floor. I had a glass block wall that was facing north. I had excellent lighting for painting. The wind was blowing with gusts of 50 mph with gusts of rain and it forced rainwater throughout the entire gallery. Half the roof peeled, the glass wall collapsed and my studio became ground zero for our office.

Q: Were you able to rescue the artwork or was much of it destroyed?

Brent: We have a cleanup crew. They’ve stripped all the wood and Sheetrock. We’re drying it out now and getting ready for reconstruction. Even at this point it’s hard to determine. All the paintings and two-dimensional artwork are mine.

We carry jewelry, wood, glass, and ceramics by other artisans. We brought all the remaining artwork that did not have mildew or where the surface was not ruined, to my house.

There is a good portion of it that remains. But there’s also a good portion that disappeared.

Q: Did people evacuate? Was there a warning?

Brent: The surprise was, everybody knew pretty much where it was going to hit. But it was first predicted to be a Category 2, then predicted to be a Category 3. It was not until the last day, that they said “Oh, no, it’s going up to Category 4.”

We’ve had several 3s come through this area. People were sort of like: “We can live through a (Category) 3.” It suddenly went up to a 4, went to a 4-plus, it was right on the edge between a 4 and 5. There were some places that winds were clocked at over 150 mph. That will pretty much destroy any structure. Homes in Mexico Beach that were not on pilings are just slabs now.

Q: What is the greatest need?

Brent: Donating to emergency services for the people who are really in terrible need here is the No. 1 thing. The necessities of life: food, bathrooms, shelter. People are fixing up their homes as quickly possible. They’re getting back to work. Now they’re trying to get their lives back together. Certainly Red Cross and Salvation Army are two (organizations) at the top for people really in terrible need.

Q: Seaside is vulnerable in a Cascadia Subduction Zone event. Do you find lessons to be learned from Hurricane Michael?

Brent: With homes on both coasts, it looks like we’re being hit by a double whammy.

We enjoy living here during the cooler months and we enjoy living in Seaside in



Jensen Brent and friend Paul Keating salvage artwork from the home of Paul and Lara Brent in Mexico Beach, Florida, after Hurricane Michael.

Photos by Paul Brent



Damage at the Paul Brent Gallery after the hurricane that hit in Panama City, Florida.



Hurricane damage at the Paul Brent Gallery in Panama City, Florida.



Devastation near the Brent home in Mexico City, Florida, after Hurricane Michael.



Paul and Lara Brent plan to rebuild their homes in Mexico City, Florida, after Hurricane Michael.

the warmer months.

We don’t think that it’s going to change that part of our lives. If you’re in any coastal area, no matter where it is, you’re

in danger of some sort of natural disaster.

I have relatives in Oklahoma. I remember as a young child going through areas hit by tornadoes. It was like looking at

what I’m looking at now.

Q: Are you putting your gallery and house together?

Brent: We have a professional construction crew doing the final cleanup and dry-out of the structure. Then we’ll be working with another crew to do a build-back. I’m at home. One of our sons came to help us.

We’re going through all of the artwork and we’ll be doing an inventory.

Then we’re going to be moving our offices to our home for a temporary solution, then eventually reconstruct.

People have said, “Do you think people will stay here?” “Do you think our businesses, our downtown will come back?” Every business owner (has said) “We’re building back.”

Our Air Force base has said “We’re building back” (Vice President) Mike Pence was just here and he arrived at our Tyndall Air Force Base and said “We’re dedicating money to building Tyndall back.”

So there’s really a very positive feeling. We’ll make it a better place.

R.J. Marx is The Daily Astorian’s South County reporter and editor of the Seaside Signal and Cannon Beach Gazette.