

Just Read, Florida!
HAZARDOUS WEATHER AWARENESS WEEK
ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS

REGION 1

Student's Name: Ryan Wells

Grade: 11

Teacher: Ms. Sherry Joyner

School Name: Altha Public School

County: Calhoun

Essay:

The evening of September 15th, 2004 proved to be one of the most fast-paced and hectic days of 2004 for WJHG's chief meteorologist, Jason Kelley, and for residents all across the Florida Panhandle. After a brief stay at a Category Five, Hurricane Ivan came sweeping through the Gulf of Mexico, making landfall in Gulf Shores, Alabama. Ranking as the ninth most intense Atlantic basin hurricane, Ivan had already proved that he was going to be terrible. Jason Kelley stayed up throughout the night, broadcasting the latest information from the National Weather Service, as well as what he knew, from past experiences, on what this hurricane was capable of doing. Using the latest VIPIR technology, technology that he helped create, Jason was able to view rotating vortexes that had the potential to cause the genesis of a tornado. A native Alabamian, Jason diligently tracked these potentially deadly vortexes, relaying his information to the thousands of viewers watching his every step. One such cell appeared well formed, as was illustrated by the inwardly facing hook-like projection on the radar. Jason spent a great deal of time focusing on this tornadic activity. He pinpointed the current location of the cell at 6:35 PM CST on September 15th, and gave the estimated time of arrival for several cities in its path, including my hometown of Altha, Florida. He predicted that it would come through Altha at 6:55, giving the residents of this great community plenty of time to prepare for the worst. The worst occurred at 6:58 when the tornado, of an unknown intensity, came roaring by, just east of Altha, claiming the lives of four individuals and destroying countless homes. A huge swath of destruction was exposed during this tornado's reign, leveling trees and destroying sections of road and power lines. The information that Jason presented to the public that night saved dozens of lives, quite possibly the lives of my own family members. He remained calm and collected as he gave instructions on how to prepare for this last minute tornado. The twenty-three minute warning he gave us was almost double the standard tornado warning time, giving the residents of Altha, and of nearby Blountstown, ample time to prepare. His near heroic actions that night protected the people of Florida from one of the most lethal natural disasters on the face of this planet. Ivan versus Jason was an intense battle, with Ivan claiming the lives of several people and Jason protecting hundreds more. Mankind very rarely triumphs over the brute strength of Mother Nature, but on the night of September 15th and the following morning, Jason Kelley prevailed, not by destroying the opponent, but by informing the spectators of the dangers. In times of natural disaster, information is the key to success and survival.

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REGION 2/GRAND PRIZE WINNER

Student's Name: John Turner

Grade: 11

Teacher: Mr. Mark Williams

School Name: Lincoln High School

County: Leon

Essay:

Over the past few years, Floridians have endured countless hardships and devastating losses attributed to abnormally active hurricane seasons. Nevertheless, tropical storms and meteorology in general have always been an interest of mine. For as long as I can remember, my father and I have gathered around the television each hurricane season watching tropical updates and plotting storms on weather maps. Experiencing the steady rains and gusty winds of an occasional tropical storm was fascinating. However, I never truly understood the full magnitude of such a powerful force of nature until a hurricane directly impacted a family friend, Eric Harms. Mr. Harms, a professor of meteorology at Brevard Community College, was forced to flee from the wrath of Hurricane Frances as it barreled towards the Space Coast in 2004. He and his wife, along with a carload of treasured possessions, arrived at our doorstep in Tallahassee just hours before the predicted landfall. This was the first time that I had ever come face to face with the emotional experience of sheltering someone who may have lost everything. At first, the atmosphere was somewhat casual, just as if a couple of friends had come for a routine visit. However, as the storm ominously approached the Space Coast, the entire house fell silent as the mood slowly became solemn and tense. We watched every update and every newscast, hoping and praying that somehow their house would weather the storm. Meanwhile, Frances continued to meander off the immediate coastline, building up the suspense before the main event. Finally, landfall came and went, along with a roller coaster of emotions ranging from periods of elation to disbelief. As if to add a final insult to the entire predicament, Frances (now a tropical storm) shifted course as it traversed over the state and cut a path straight through Tallahassee. Normally it would have been an exciting experience to witness a weakened storm as it came through, but when harboring dear friends who journeyed to escape its wrath, the time was instead apprehensive and prayerful. In the end, our friends' house and property remained intact, sustaining only minimal damage from the landfall of a major hurricane. They sought shelter with my family for about a week before heading south into the destruction. For me, the experience of being with them through this turbulent period was something much more than helping friends in need. It brought to life the emotions and tribulations that come in the wake of such a devastating force of nature. In addition, it motivated me to pursue my interest in meteorology, and to better my understanding of the forces at work in such complex systems. Since then, I created a science fair project about hurricanes which won an award at the International Science and Engineering Fair. This could not have happened without the influence of Mr. Harms and the experience of weathering Hurricane Frances together, an experience that I will remember for many years to come.

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REGION 3

Student's Name: Joseph Pardo

Grade: 12

Teacher: Ms. Deena Whitehurst

School Name: Newberry High School

County: Alachua

Essay:

The 2004 hurricane season was a time of tumultuous upheaval and destruction. The lives of many Floridians, and countless others across the nation, were violently disrupted by a rapid succession of four hurricanes. First Charley swept through, then Frances, mammoth Ivan, and finally Jeanne. The 2005 season followed suit in showing little mercy to Floridians. This season's first Florida landfall was Dennis, then historic Katrina, Rita, and finally the record holder of the lowest barometric pressure reading in the Atlantic, hurricane Wilma. I was fortunate enough to escape both seasons relatively unscathed. There were two men, however, who had a tremendous impact and influence on my life over the past two hurricane seasons: Mike Potter and Bill Quinlan, meteorologists for TV 20 News, of Gainesville, Florida.

These two gentlemen have done an outstanding job communicating important tropical weather information to the surrounding community. I, as well as the majority of common citizens, simply do not have the education to begin to fathom the workings of our atmosphere. My family and I have relied on Mr. Potter and Mr. Quinlan to relay information on "upper-level lows," "mid-latitude cyclones," and other meteorological jargon to us, in a concise and simplified manner. It is during hurricane season that their advising becomes paramount. If my town is ever destined to receive a direct hit, I can trust my local weather men to inform me quickly, leaving adequate time to make the necessary preparations. There is no doubt that these two men's knowledge and opinions affect my life remarkably during hurricane season.

We often take the local "weather man" for granted. TV/Weather broadcast has become a valuable resource that can be credited with saving lives. The landfall of Hurricane Katrina has proven to be one of the most lamentable events in American history. However, due to technological advances and men like Mike Potter and Bill Quinlan, hurricane death tolls are lower than ever. For example, the Galveston Hurricane of 1900 was comparable to Katrina, yet death toll estimates range from 8,000 to a staggering 12,000. The role of the local weather man is a role of great importance. Meteorologists should not be taken for granted. Though I have no personal relationship with Mike Potter and Bill Quinlan, they have kept me prepared for what may come along during the treacherous Atlantic hurricane season in Florida. I know I can depend on them to provide up-to-date, accurate weather forecasts.

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REGION 4

Student's Name: Michael Bastian

Grade: 11

Teacher: Ms. Conni Shelnut

School Name: Lakeland High School

County: Polk

Essay:

After Hurricane Charley terrorized my home town of Lakeland, Florida in 2004, the ruthless storm left behind a chaos of broken branches and devastated homes. Battered by the unforgiving wind, numerous trees collapsed onto their owners' property, creating widespread havoc. Enduring the hurricane's fury first hand, my neighbor Waldo, an elderly man with health problems, listened in horror as part of an ancient oak tree collapsed onto his home, destroying his roof and snapping his power line. When the following morning arrived and Waldo realized the severity of the damage to his property, he was devastated. Unable to contact a tree service and incapable of moving the heavy debris himself, Waldo decided to ask my family for assistance, after he saw us outside inspecting our own damage.

Deprived of sleep, Waldo wearily shuffled his feet to our yard and sadly explained his troublesome situation. After hearing his distressing account, we didn't hesitate to offer our help. As we trekked down the street, zigzagging and climbing over the perilous branches that covered the ground, we recruited a few additional neighbors to our cause. Inspecting the catastrophe from a safe distance, we devised a brilliant strategy to remove the dangerous tree from the crushed roof. Equipped with chainsaws, from the tops of ladders, we swarmed the tree like ants on sugar. Cutting the massive oak tree piece-by-piece, we managed to sever the broken limb from the shattered trunk. After carving the wooden remains into manageable sizes, we hauled and rolled an endless supply of wood off Waldo's roof and out of his yard to the street curb, on the opposite side of the house.

As a result of aiding my unfortunate neighbor during the hurricane season, I have acquired a new friend who has taught me to understand the meaning behind helping others. By assisting Waldo and seeing his resulting happiness, I have realized that being caring and helpful makes me a better person, one who can make a difference in the world. Also, because he appreciated the time and effort that we had dedicated to helping him, Waldo now often invites my family to his home. Spending evenings and sometimes even holidays together for dinners and celebrations, we have created a close bond. As a result of my efforts, I helped to restore order to a neighbor's life after the tragic events caused by Hurricane Charley while also gaining a lifelong friend.

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REGION 5

Student's Name: Evan Skuderin

Grade: 10

Teacher: Mrs. Mary Jane Wright

School Name: Lake Mary High School

County: Seminole

Essay:

In the climax of Hurricane Charley, my family and I heard the rumble of a tornado which eventually demolished everything in my neighborhood. Luckily, all of us in the neighborhood were saved by a single man. He was from the National Hurricane Center with an amphibious rescue vehicle. I remember when I first heard the tornado; it began very softly and quickly became louder. We had almost no time to make the decision of staying in the house or risking it all and going outside. Soon, we didn't have a choice because our house became outside in a matter of seconds. Running as fast as I could, I saw all of my neighbors running in the same direction - toward a light that seemed to scream, "REFUGE!" The sight of light was easily forgotten because of the power outage earlier in the evening. Everything seemed to go by so fast. The dirt. The blood. The screaming. The fear. It all seemed overpowering. I did not recognize one of the people in the rescue vehicle. She was unconscious: hit by an uprooted tree stump, lucky to be alive. Everything in that vehicle was safe. But why? Was it the six-inch thick steel plated walls, or the man in the driver's seat with a continuous smile which reassured us all into thinking everything would be alright. When the woman came to consciousness, she was feeling around for something to her side. When she realized her item was not there, she began to scream at the top of her lungs. The driver, continuing to smile and attempt to maintain the positive feeling in the vehicle, asked what was wrong. The screaming woman answered, "My baby! Where's my baby!" Without any thought at all, the driver instinctively turned around and went back to the mangled neighborhood. The tornado had shifted course, and it was relatively safe to travel back to the neighborhood. At that point I thought to myself, what are the chances that someone could survive in a storm of that magnitude? I wouldn't have doubted that the driver felt the same way, but he raced back to the wreckage in search of this lady's child. It may have been luck, but he saw a pair of legs jutting from beneath a thin sheet of metal. He leaped out of the vehicle and sprinted toward the child; he quickly picked him up and returned to the vehicle. Amazingly, the child was neither dead nor unconscious. The victims of the tornado had all experienced the same miracle: a death toll of zero. I admire the man that saved not only my life, but the life of the people I love the most in this world. Without his will power and love of human life, no one in my neighborhood would have ever seen the light of day again. I would like to say thank you to the best hero I know: Sean Paul Matthews.

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REGION 6

Student's Name: Vanessa Attia

Grade: 11

Teacher: Mrs. Gale Tidwell

School Name: Charlotte High School

County: Charlotte

Essay:

Before the 2004 hurricane season, I was plagued with indifference and indecisiveness, but my experience with my sister during Hurricane Charley impacted me in such a way as to pull me from my teenage apathy. Seeing how my sister was affected by a stressful situation allowed me to realize the importance of being independent, realistic, and responsible about my present and my future.

Tiffany took seriously the threat of the impending hurricane, and wanted my company on that Friday the 13th to help prepare her apartment. I, on the other hand, assumed the storm would slow significantly or simply change its course. Even as we compiled the batteries, flashlights, and radio, it was hard to lose my blasé attitude. While we taped the windows and sliding glass door panels with big crooked Xs, and ran out of tape when we got to the last pane, I couldn't find it in myself to be worried. What match is a tropical weather system in the face of a static, adolescent view of reality?

As the windows began to bulge from the force of the winds, we took our blankets and radio into the bathroom to wait out the storm. By the time we heard the tapeless window pane burst, Tiffany was obviously shaken and making frantic calls on her cellular phone, often to no avail. She was visibly upset that her apartment, her hard-earned symbol of independence and success after 27 years, was being ruined by the elements. Sitting there in the dark, I realized there would be times in my life when a situation would overwhelm me, and I would need to be prepared to face it. I would have to grow up; things would not always pass me by so easily. I comforted her, and wondered how our mother, grandfather, and brother were fairing at our house a mere three minutes away.

When the storm had passed, Tiffany and I ventured out of the bathroom to assess the damage. Once reunited with the family, we learned from my mother's ever-so-subtle statement that the house was literally "gone". In the aftermath, my sister was there to help and support me. What followed was a stuffy night in my sister's boarded-up apartment, a week of residence at a Best Western, and a temporary move to Englewood. Tiffany resided with a friend for six months while organizing the repairs in her apartment.

In retrospect, I am inspired by my sister's resolve to prepare and her ability to assume responsibility during an emotionally taxing situation. The worth of hoping for the best and preparing for the worst cannot be undermined, especially when at the mercy of Mother Nature. The importance of family togetherness in trying times has become undeniably apparent. Being with my sister that hurricane season and witnessing her response, encouraged me to assume an independent and responsible credo in my own endeavors. I realized that growth cannot spring from ignorance and nonchalance, but must come from awareness and resolve.

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REGION 7

Student's Name: Leonicka Valcius

Grade: 11

Teacher: Dr. Susan Baum

School Name: Atlantic Community High School

County: Palm Beach

Essay:

When I think of all the pain and suffering in the world it is easy to become cynical. It seems that the evils of the world far outweigh the good. Then I remember the little people; the unsung heroes who embody altruism; the ones who, as unbelievable as it sounds, truly enjoy helping others. These heroes are always here, saving the world one life at a time. But it is in times of panic and disaster that their value is recognized. The outpouring of compassion and generosity that was seen after the hurricanes revealed the amazing potential for human kindness. One such hero is my mother, Nicole. As a cardiac registered nurse at Boca Raton Community Hospital, she often treats patients in need of special care. This need increased exponentially during the disaster. When Hurricane Frances barreled through South Florida, my mother and the rest of my family went to the hospital. For us the hospital was just a nice hurricane shelter that provided free food and a place to sleep. For my mother it was work. While the wind howled and the torrents of rain persisted, my mother spent her days with patients who were too ill to be discharged. Early in the morning, my mother would get off the mat the six of us were sleeping on and get ready for a long day. At nightfall she would come back, tired and hungry, but fulfilled. It is this sense of fulfillment that puts my mother among the ranks of heroes. Nursing is her life. There is not a day that goes by without my mother taking care of someone. She puts her entire heart and soul into her work and is never satisfied with mediocrity. The love she has for her patients can be seen through her intense concern for their safety. Therefore, I was not surprised when my mother endured the long hours and harsh conditions of hurricane duty without complaining. From her point of view, only the patients mattered. The amazing thing is that my mother is not unique. These awesome heroes walk among us everyday without us knowing. They appear during crises such as September 11th, Hurricane Katrina, and the Tsunami of the South Pacific. Then they fade into the background before anyone can thank them. To be honest, that is why I wrote this essay: to express my unshakable gratitude to all of the world's heroes, my mother especially. What they do each day of their lives makes each day of our lives just a little bit better