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Five years after Charley, Punta Gorda shines

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The past couple of years have been trying times for people in Southwest Florida, an area particularly hard hit by the ill winds of a faltering economy. Jobs have been lost, businesses closed and neighborhoods turned sour by abandoned construction sites and foreclosed houses. This land of sunshine and dreams come true has seen the other side of paradise.

Yet as tough as the recession has been for many local residents, the people of Charlotte and DeSoto counties can teach their neighbors a thing or two about rebuilding. And they can attest to the fact that storm clouds do have silver linings.

It was five years ago next Thursday that Hurricane Charley came calling. The visit had not been planned. Forecasters predicted the storm churning in the Gulf of Mexico would come ashore in the Tampa Bay area, likely as a Category 2 hurricane, enough to do major damage but not necessarily a killer. All that changed on the morning of Friday, Aug. 13. The storm inexplicably strengthened and turned east, taking a bead on Charlotte Harbor.

Time stood still

Punta Gorda's landmark town clock stopped at 4:27 p.m., about the time the winds of Hurricane Charley reached their peak, somewhere around 145 mph. Mercifully, the storm was a fast-mover and before sundown it had done its damage.

In one dark afternoon, the communities around Charlotte Harbor and along the Peace River became scenes of destruction the likes of which even Hollywood could not have replicated. Some 17,000 homes in Charlotte County alone were destroyed and an estimated 80 percent of the structures in Punta Gorda were damaged.

But that is not the end of the story. Five years have passed since Charley departed the scene and little today is the same as it was either before or immediately after the storm. Punta Gorda is hardly recognizable for those who remember it pre-Charley and, though many residents will not likely forget the hardships they have endured, most will agree it

is a better place today than ever before.

Prophetic words

Looking back at one of the articles printed in the Herald-Tribune just a week after the storm, a comment made by Al Leonard, a downtown merchant at the time, seems prophetic in retrospect: "If the City Council pays attention, this could be rebuilt better than it ever was. They should recognize the character of Punta Gorda and not allow it to become a bunch of strip malls."

Someone must have heard him. In fact, lots of someones.

While thousands of rescue workers converged on Charlotte County to restore power and telephone service, clear the streets, keep the peace, and provide food and shelter for those displaced, residents and business people got right to work rebuilding their town.

TEAM Punta Gorda was formed overnight and an internationally known city planner, Jaime Correa from Miami, was engaged to draft a citizens master plan. That effort, along with the cooperation of public officials and private citizens from around the area, has resulted in a town reborn.

A drive south across the Peace River bridge on U.S. 41 as it leads into Punta Gorda provides a breathtaking skyline of new hotels, a spectacular conference center, redeveloped parks and a harbor walk lined with palm trees and grassy areas. Leisure boats fill the marina at the rebuilt Laishley Park, which will be the scene of a celebration next weekend to mark the city's progress. A downtown parking garage camouflaged to look like a cluster of row houses with retail space on the first floor is ready for tenants, and a restaurant on the water is scheduled to open in conjunction with the Charley anniversary.

A sense of confidence

A number of dignitaries, including several international trade ambassadors, are expected in town next week to observe the transformation and, local officials hope, to consider the area for future business investment.

Punta Gorda and the rest of Charlotte County have not escaped the ravages of the housing bust and accompanying national recession, but the rebuilding sparked by Hurricane Charley has helped soften the blow.

And, just as important, the people of Punta Gorda, having survived one of the most devastating hurricanes ever to hit Florida, have a sense of confidence in their abilities to overcome adversity. They've only to look at what has been accomplished in the past five years to know that they are ready to make the next five even more exciting.

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