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Five years after Charley, a party

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As ominous clouds rolled in and winds picked up on Saturday, former Gov. Jeb Bush signaled for Punta Gorda Mayor Larry Friedman to speed up his introduction.

"Whenever the winds get more than 20 miles an hour, I start twitching," Bush said.

Bush could be excused for a little nervousness. After all, he was speaking at the Xtreme Makeover Celebration, marking five years since Hurricane Charley blew through with 145-mph winds and destroyed much of the city.

Residents and visitors to Laishley Park didn't let a few raindrops interfere with their fun, or their pride in the city's revitalization. As Friedman introduced numerous state and local officials who have been instrumental in the rebuilding, the loudest applause was saved for Bush.

After Charley hit on Aug. 13, 2004, the then-governor visited the community immediately and helped secure federal aid. He said the drive in from Miami this weekend stirred memories of seeing emergency first responders on the scene, and a life being saved at a special needs center. He also spoke fondly of attending a football game between Charlotte and Port Charlotte high schools, whose bands kicked off the festivities on Saturday.

Bush and other speakers, like Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp and Attorney General Bill McCollum, applauded the community for its efforts.

As hundreds of residents enjoyed music, food and beverages at the redeveloped park and marina, they were just a few steps from the newly opened Laishley Crab House, a restaurant and retail center. In the background were two new hotels and the conference center.

The scenery is far different than on that dreadful day five years ago. Vonnie Holder had



PHOTOS / MATT HOUSTON

Steve Skiest, Marsha Smith, Rand Smith and Gary Tucker pose for a picture with the Hurricane Charley memorial at Laishley Park in Punta Gorda. The storm hit the area five years ago this week.

just moved to Punta Gorda shortly before Charley arrived. Eight Punta Gorda Isles neighbors huddled together in a utility room and listened to a portable radio.

"The Fort Myers weatherman said, 'Punta Gorda, you've got 15 minutes!'" Holder remembered. "The winds picked up. I grew up in Florida, but I've never experienced anything like it."

"It was loud, deafening. It was screaming loud," said Jim Minardi, who rode out the storm at home with two dogs. "They were scared to death, whimpering." So, he said, was he.

They said the real crying began when they saw the damage to their boats. Holder said she suffered \$150,000 worth of damage to her house and property, and \$66,000 worth to her boat.

Minardi's boat was uninsured, and he had to buy a new one. His flattened home, however, was rebuilt by craftsman Bob Vila as part of a hurricane recovery program. He said it cost more than \$400,000 to rebuild.

Today, the new look to the city, in just five years' time, is worthy of a celebration capped by Saturday night's fireworks. The turnaround is almost unbelievable to Holder and Minardi.

"I never thought it'd happen," Minardi said. "It's the best thing to happen. Talk about a revitalization. The city is alive, we've got things happening."

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