

# One Public Library's Response to the Storm of the Century

by Willie Nelms

**O**n September 15, 1999, Hurricane Floyd dropped more than 15 inches of rain on Pitt County in less than 24 hours. This followed more than ten inches of rain received from Hurricane Dennis less than two weeks earlier. Thus, in less than 14 days, Pitt County and the City of Greenville received more than half its annual rainfall. This massive amount of rain in eastern North Carolina produced floods of the Tar River that exceeded the 100 year flood plain and, in many cases, went beyond the 500 year flood plain. In referring to 500 year flood damage, one resident noted, "The last time some of these areas were flooded, the only people who were living here were the Tuscarora Indians."

The Tar River at Greenville finally crested at more than 29 1/2 feet, nearly 17 feet above flood stage. The previous recorded high for the river was in 1919 when the river crested at 24 feet. Of course, in 1919 many fewer people lived in areas that had since become inhabited, so the personal devastation caused by the flooding from Floyd was much more extensive.

The results of Hurricane Floyd and the floods that followed have been well documented in the media, and it is not my purpose to repeat those stories here. I would like, however, to describe how one library coped with the damage to our area and our patrons, how we tried to operate during the storm and the floods that followed, and how we all continue to recover even as I write.

Sheppard Memorial Library is the public library that serves Greenville and Pitt County. The system is composed of a main library, four branches, and a

bookmobile. There is a full-time equivalency of 31 staff members. The full-time staff is composed of 19 people with an average tenure of more than 10 years. I have been director of the library for the past 19 1/2 years. Thus, we have a stable, veteran staff that is committed to the community.

On Tuesday, September 14, we fully recognized that Hurricane Floyd was going to hit us directly. Our staff began preparations by securing our facilities against potential wind damage, determining how we would communicate during and after the storm, and identifying possible areas of flooding caused by the storm. Our preparations included moving equipment away from windows, banking sandbags against a basement door, and moving loose objects from the exterior of the building. Our concern about possible storm damage was increased because our main library and our largest branch buildings were both undergoing major expansions at the time. As part of the construction, the footings of the main library building were exposed to the elements. Extensive contacts with the building contractors assured us that they were deploying sump pumps to force water away from our main building. The expansion of our largest branch did not involve exposing the footings, so our main concerns were weatherproofing the above-grade portion of the building.

As the storm arrived on Wednesday, September 15, we secured our locations, and closed at 5 p.m., four hours earlier than normal. The decision also was made to close on Thursday, September 16, since the brunt of the storm was expected to hit early on that morning. The early closing was also necessary because

of the force and volume of rain that was falling. Staff was sent home with instructions to call a designated library phone extension for a recorded message on when to return to work. This process had been used in previous bad weather situations and proved once again to be very useful. (It is possible for us to change the message on this line from remote locations, so information can be conveyed quickly, and it is much more efficient than trying to call staff individually.)

The winds from the hurricane were less than anticipated, but the rains exceeded our worst expectations. I came to the library on Wednesday night during a lull in the storm and discovered that our basement area children's library (approximately 4100 square feet) had two inches of water in it. The sump pump protecting that area had been overpowered. Fortunately, we had banked sandbags against the door where the water entered. Otherwise, the water damage would have been much greater.

Likewise, the contractor-deployed sump pumps on the exterior of the building that protected the footings were overpowered, and it was necessary to bring in gas powered pumps to save the day. The lull in the storm on September 15 lasted long enough for us to push the water back with the gas-powered pumps. We were also very lucky that the storm did not disrupt the power at this point, so electrical sump pumps could still be used. We were prepared for the potential loss of power, however. We planned to bring our bookmobile with its diesel-powered generator next to the building to provide power for the sump pumps should we lose electricity from our local utility company.

If we had not pumped the water

away from the building during this lull, the damage to our building would have been much greater. As it was, the storm produced approximately \$50,000 damage to the main library, none of which was to the building footings. Main library building damage included the flooded basement, ruined carpet, and damage to walls caused by leaks around chimneys. The other four buildings suffered only minor damage due to the storm, so we considered ourselves lucky.

In describing this situation, it is important to separate the two very distinct parts of the Floyd calamity. The hurricane, its winds and rain, were over for us by the end of Thursday, September 16. Much greater damage was to come to our community, however, as the Tar River began to rise. It forced hundreds of people from their homes, and the community operated in a state of emergency for the next two weeks.

On the morning of Friday, September 17, the library system opened for business as usual. We quickly discovered that two full-time staff members had lost their homes because of the rising river waters. One of these staff members was forced to escape to Bethel in the northern part of the county. She was not able to return to work for ten days because of the raging Tar River that divided the county. Roads flooded and transportation between the northern and southern part of the county were nearly impossible, other than by helicopter or boat.

As the staff gathered for work on Friday, we began de-

ploying individuals to provide books and programs to the Red Cross shelters that had opened to help displaced citizens. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, we knew that many of our patrons would not be coming to the library, so we prepared to answer questions for patrons who called us for reference assistance regarding disaster information. Much of this was information-referral. Typical information provided included the local disaster relief agency phone numbers and information on how to deal with water-damaged business and personal papers.

We also saw our mission as serving as a safe haven where people who were displaced might come for refuge. During the days that followed, we continued to fill this mission. Some of our staff members worked in the Emergency Operations Center for the City of Greenville. Here they used their public service skills,

talking with people who called to ask for assistance. Many of these people were facing the rising river water and called for help in evacuation.

Some staff members carried books to migrant Hispanic families who stayed in shelters outside the normal Red Cross network. The children's outreach staff also offered programs for these families. Other staff provided books to National Guard members who were assigned to our area during the disaster relief. Assigned to a strange location with nothing to do between shifts, many of them from as far away as Kentucky, they welcomed the reading material we offered.

As the days passed and we heard the regular drone of helicopters over the city ferrying people to safety, the library only missed two days of operation. The lost time was caused by an interruption in electrical power on Saturday, September 18, and Sunday, September 19. Fortu-



*The intersection of 14th Street and Charles Street (Hwy 43) in Greenville was impassable for days, cutting off traffic to downtown Greenville, the ECU main campus, and the stadium/coliseum complex, just behind this warehouse. Bales of tobacco, garbage bags and other debris floated down the 'pond' of both streets. Photo courtesy Gary Weathersbee.*



*Next page: North Library Street in Greenville was part of a neighborhood that became not just near-the-river property — but part of the Tar River! Photo courtesy Edie Tibbits.*



nately, power was restored by Monday, September 20, and we were able to resume operations.

As might be imagined, walk-in traffic from regular patrons was very slow because people who were not directly damaged by the floods were helping with the rescue efforts. We still continued to maintain our regular schedule of hours and tried to offer a sense of normalcy to the community. The local newspaper took notice of our efforts and encouraged local parents with bored, out-of-school children to send them to the library to read a good book or participate in one of our programs.

While the floods did not directly affect our buildings, and the storm produced relatively minor damage, we soon realized that one of the greatest impacts of the floods on us would be the books that were in the hands of our patrons who lost their homes and possessions in the rising waters. In order to help patrons, we designated a "Flood Relief" phone line and asked patrons who had lost library material to contact us. We adapted our normal overdue procedures to designate our usual overdue notice as a "Disaster relief notice." These letters simply asked patrons to contact us if they had losses due to the floods. Our initial estimates were that more than \$11,000 worth of library material was lost in the floods. We are still assessing this final total, but we expect this original estimate to be fairly accurate.

Our bookmobile service offered special problems of its own. One of our bookmobile staff members had lost her home and belongings in the flood. Likewise, our bookmobile traveled to many mobile home parks and residential areas that were destroyed by the floods. We

tried to assess the possible number of bookmobile stops that would be lost in the flood but quickly realized that the flooding was so random that it was impossible to get an accurate count of lost sites until the bookmobile was able to return to the road. We made a decision not to resume bookmobile service until the roads were deemed safe for schoolbuses to travel. When we finally resumed service about two weeks after the storm, we discovered that 6 of our 125 bookmobile stops were totally destroyed. People no longer lived at these locations, and the floods had destroyed their homes. We are still in the process of discovering these "lost" patrons, some of whom have left the county and the state.

Three Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) mobile sites were established as temporary quarters for flood victims. These sites house travel-trailer and full-size mobile homes. Our bookmobile began service to these sites, and the patrons seemed genuinely grateful for the service we provide. Service to the sites will continue as long as they are in operation.

We are now in the recovery phase of this natural disaster, and life has returned to relative normalcy for our library system. Our building program continues and was only slightly delayed by the storm. We are still identifying patrons who lost material in the floods and will be for months to come.

I am especially proud of our library staff for their hard work and dedication to service during the storm, the floods that followed, and the recovery that will continue well into the future. We were very fortunate that none of our buildings were destroyed or damaged by the floods. Many other libraries in North

Carolina were not as fortunate, and our sincerest condolences go out to them.

Because we did not suffer massive damage to our facilities, we were able to stay in business and to adapt our normal library services to the needs of the our community. Our staff used their "people" skills, honed during normal times, to assist people affected by the storm. Local officials were grateful that we were available to offer assistance in a variety of ways.

I am especially glad that we were able to serve as a haven for the community during this crisis. By operating in as normal a fashion as possible, we provided a touchstone of normalcy for the community at a time of great need. When a disaster of any kind occurs, people need to know that the institutions in which they believe are still functioning. It gives them a sense of comfort at a time when all else around them may be falling apart.

This effort drew on the skills of all our staff. It tested us as individuals and as an organization. In looking back at the experience, there is very little that I would do differently. Operating in such an environment is very much out of the ordinary and does not allow the luxury of reflection. During the crisis stage, actions must be taken promptly and decisions made quickly. The people in charge of operations must be willing and able to make these decisions. I believe that we made the best decisions based on the information we had at the time.

It was not an experience that I ever hope to encounter again, but I think we will be prepared in case such storms strike in the future. I am also glad that we were able to help out in our community in this time of great need.

