

The person on the right is Greg, he is a survivor of Hurricane Florence. So is his wife Gina who took the photograph I used as the reference for this Painting. This is Greg and three of his brothers, celebrating his birthday almost five months after Hurricane Florence. For me this picture embodies RESILIENCE.

Greg is the chef at the Kettle Diner in Jacksonville. He has been for a very long time. His wife Gina told me she had worked there {16} sixteen years before Florence struck. Downtown Jacksonville had almost three feet of water near the marina where the river flows into the town. This is the location of The Kettle diner. The Kettle suffered killing damage: roof, equipment, walls, flooring, wiring, plumbing, HVAC, it was practically all damaged. It is the hub for the community. People come here for breakfast, lunch, and supper. And it is a place where you can always count on a good fresh meal with good company at a reasonable price. A lot of people come several times a week, some come every day for supper, and some come to celebrate family and friendship. Greg's cousin makes their incredibly delicious strawberry cakes to help put her daughter through college at UNC. Some people just come for the desserts and some coffee or their amazing heavenly hot chocolate. Others come for Greg's collards, or the fresh local shrimp on Friday nights. I love the diner. And her people who work there are like family to me since I am so far away from mine.

Frank, the owner with his wife, and little girls had to start from scratch to rebuild. All their employees were just on "hold" while it was being rebuilt, and it took the insurance company a long time to get to it. In the meantime all those who work there and they are many, were without employment. It was devastating. It was a time of immense and constant praying. All this financial disaster was on top of having their homes lost or damaged heavily. The winds and water just kept coming in Florence. Someone described it as like being run over by a turtle. But it was much worse than any animal could do.

Brittany, who works at the Kettle lost her home and all its contents. Everything. She said, "This was the home I brought my babies home to. It is the only home they have ever known. I made them leave most of their soft toys when we were fleeing to my mom's in Tennessee. Now they are ruined." Black mold quickly came into most of the homes, engulfing everything in a toxic evil smelling film. For almost four months, she had no job. When I asked her if she wanted a temporary one, she didn't feel it would be right to take one and then leave as soon as the diner opened up again. "Because they are more than a place to work, they are like family. They understand if the baby has an ear infection and I need to be with her. Miss Gina, she knows why I care about my girls. With her, family comes first and she will help me make it work." Brittany worked night and day trying hard to put a home back together for her girls and two dogs. It was exhausting, hot, sweaty work. And her landlord at Royal Villa even tried to charge her rent for an uninhabitable trailer she could no longer live in, demanding that she go into that black mold and clean out her belongings among the fallen ceiling and gaping floor boards if she wanted her deposit back. So she did. Her sister came for two days from Iowa to bring toxic waste clean up suits, and they went in there and cleaned out their belongings and carted them to the landfill. The insurance required her to document every single item on her renter's insurance in order to file a claim.

The insurance companies have not come out of this disaster smelling like roses. Neither has FEMA. That is not this story. Just my opinion as a sidenote.

Gina worked making and selling crafts, and holiday lights, to help pay bills. Greg got a job working on the clean up crews' trucks going around to pick up off the side of the road the interiors of homes where it was stacked up six to eight feet high along all the roads in all the counties devastated by Hurricane Florence. Jumbled together were insulation, cabinets, paneling, roofing materials, furniture, sheet rock and all the other parts of people's lives and security which were devastated.

Every day or so, Gina would post a message on 'facebook' telling us in the diner community how things were going, and they were going rocky. The waiting was hard. Everyone missed the fellowship we had at the Kettle. We missed Greg's great food and mourned the necessity which had him out riding around doing the hard work he had to instead of using his Gifts creating favorite meals for us. He makes collards that are legendary and last year introduced us to "run up turnips" which only have a three week season out of the whole year. The butterbeans they grow in their garden, and he buys the produce by stopping by on the way to work to get it fresh. We can tell. There is no place like the diner that I have ever been to. You can get any kind of food you want at any time, and it is always good. And the people there make you feel welcome. So to finally hear it was reopening after four months of waiting, with the people there selling "kiss my grits, FLO" t-shirts, pet sitting, working retail and making crafts to survive, was like music to our ears. It has been packed ever since. No delay in getting back up and running. Just gladness that the nightmare of surviving was finally over.

And this birthday party of Greg with his brothers symbolizes for me the importance of family, wherever you find them, and sticking together during the tough times and the good times. That is resilience. God bless them all.