

NERVES LEFT UNRAVELED IN KATE'S WAKE

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Written By Karen Olson

Returning Saturday to a storm-struck Tallahassee, Sally Karioth felt she had stepped into a city shadowed by the threat of nervous breakdown.

“All of those borderline schizophrenics are going to call today,” predicted Karioth, a grief therapist and Florida State University nursing professor. “I got off the plane and saw people walking around looking very glassy-eyed. The cabin fever’s very bad.”

Karioth, who was speaking to West Palm Beach firefighters when Hurricane Kate struck Thursday, came home to find about eight trees leaning on her house. She spent Saturday afternoon at radio station WTNT-AM 12:70, fielding calls from stressed out victims.

As the adrenaline wears off and exhaustion sets in, officials are bracing for an influx of tearful – and in some cases, irrational – complaints.

To prevent a crises atmosphere, mental-health professionals are advising Big Bend residents to contact their friends, help their neighbors and burn off their frustration with yard work.

“I would light every candle in the house and have a big slumber party,” Karioth said. “Not being alone is the biggie. Find one person who can use your help. If your yard is clean, pick up that rake and walk next door.”

Panic occurs, she said, when people feel alone and powerless.

The American Red Cross, for example, received an alarming call last week from an elderly woman isolated on US Hwy 90 West.

“She was hysterical. We thought she was really in trouble,” said Judy Bond, the American Red Cross Health and Safety Director. “All she needed was someone to deliver dry ice.”

Similarly, Tallahassee police have endured a flood of requests for insurance advice, utility repairs and, in one case, home-delivered pizza. Radio stations, newspaper offices, taxi drivers and store personnel also are hearing an earful from disgruntled citizens.

“You have to use a lot of made-up psychology to deal with these calls,” said Roland Foust, a WTNT announcer. They’re asking us to come fix their cable television – and we’re a radio station.”

“Every single person I’ve met today has been telling me about their damage,” said Rick Ziegler, 22, a Sears clerk and FSU student. “Every one of them is upset. One lady was crying her eyes out.”

While reporting no increase in mental-health admissions, Tallahassee Memorial Regional Medical Center’s emergency room is handling numerous complaints of “aches and pains.”

Bob Lovell, the administrator on call Saturday, attributed the influx to the shutdown of doctors’ offices, rather than to storm-related stress. Nevertheless, he agreed that tension is building.

“You see these people standing in line at Publix, because they heard dry ice might be available at 4:00PM,” he said.

Those who kept busy Saturday seemed to be coping the best.

Around the FSU campus, Ziegler said, students were “either cleaning up their yards or they’re sitting back drinking beer.”

Sandy Suris, 20, called her botany professor to ask about the tensile strength of the pine trees leaning over her home.

Across town, shoppers mobbed Governor’s Square mall for holiday gifts and survival gear.

“Actually, it’s kind of interesting, because you realize how much you’ve been using TV,” said Steve Livingston, emergency-services supervisor for Apalachee Community Mental Health Services.

He spent Thursday and Friday nights talking with friends, playing Trivial Pursuit and tuning in the storm’s “adventurous” aspects.

With his agency’s phones out of order, Livingston said his staff has not been busy. But he expected that to change by mid-week, when the storm’s aftermath sinks in.

“The immediate 72 hours, people are so busy cleaning up that usually you don’t have time to react until three or four days down the road,” he said. “It may take a couple of nights of being without electricity, especially with the curfew, before that will really get you to a point where your normal coping mechanisms aren’t working any more.”

Livingston assured dazed residents that they're not alone in their grief and anger. Like Karioth, he prescribed long walks, fresh air and heavy physical work.

"Turn to your friends and family, and church if it's available," he said. "We've found that that's what works for people, and that's where you get the best support."

If you don't know anybody, the American Red Cross is more than willing to provide company. All you have to do is show up at 924 N Gadsden Street between 9:00AM and 4:00PM.

"Right now, we're taking all the volunteers we can get," Bond said.