



HURRICANE IN THE MOUNTAINS

What We Can Learn from Western North Carolina



A Blueprint NC Special Report
May 2025

By Mab Segrest
with Sofia Trovato



This BlueprintNC Report explores what some Western North Carolina organizers learned from the “unprecedented” climate disaster of a hurricane in their mountains.

We hope this information will be of use as we face increasingly “unprecedented” climate and political crises. El Nino winds swept unprecedented fires through Los Angeles as we were drafting this report, and Western North Carolina experienced wildfires in Swain, Jackson, Transylvania, Henderson and Polk counties in part from downed trees left in Helene’s wake.

COVER: HANDMADE MEMORIAL AT THE RIVERSIDE IN MARSHALL, NC // Photo by Mab Segrest
LEFT: PANSY COLLECTIVE COLLECTING RELIEF SUPPLIES // Photo by Pansy Collective

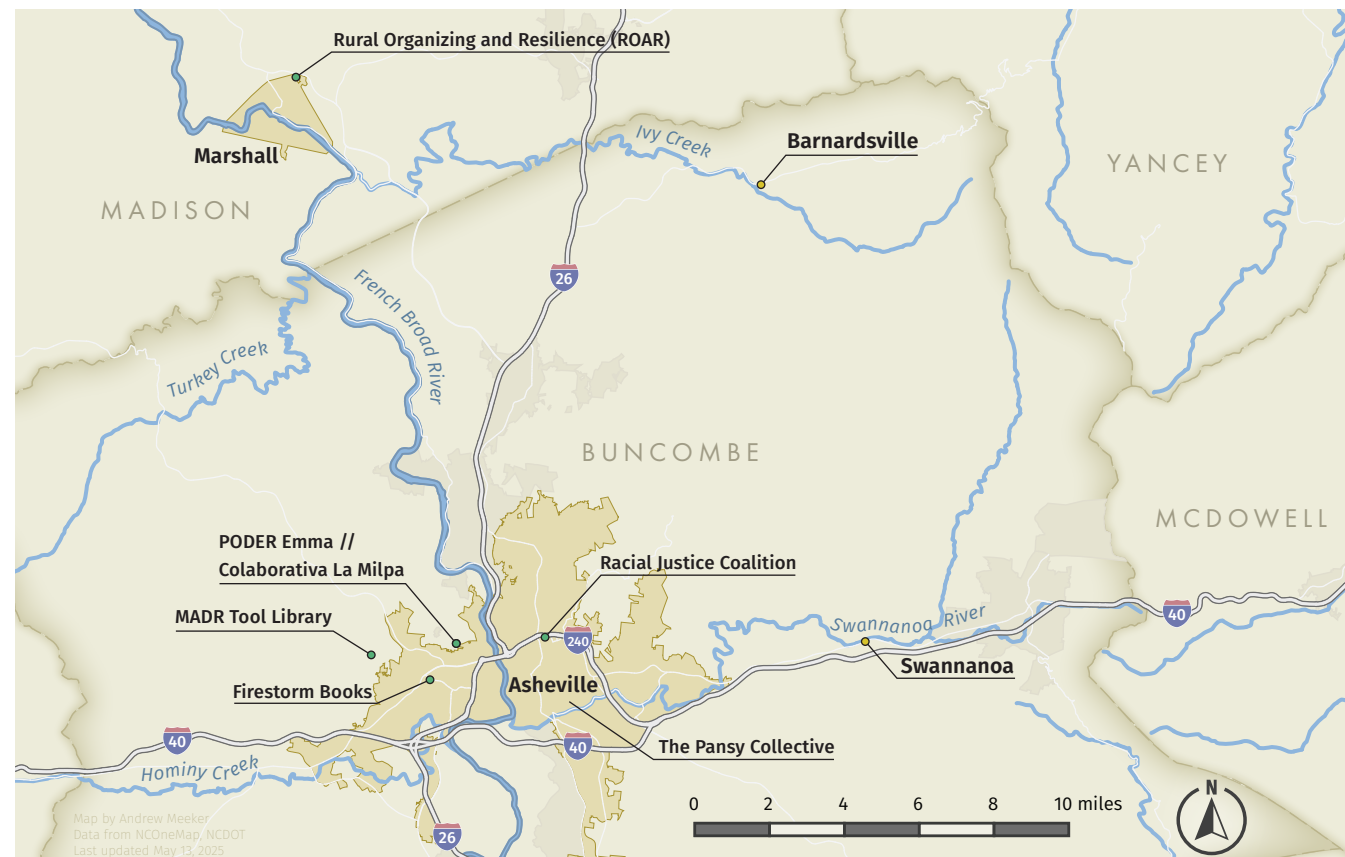
Muscle Memory, Steep Learning Curves, and Going to Scale

When Hurricane Helene hit Western North Carolina (WNC) in September of 2024, it was an unprecedented climate event. Hurricanes are common occurrences along the Atlantic coast, but a hurricane in the “climate haven” of Asheville was unheard of. Such an event would never happen¹—until it did. As climate change intensifies, events once considered unprecedented are happening more often and starting to feel routine. This shift reveals the ongoing and deepening nature of the climate crisis.

Such unprecedented local catastrophes tend to focus our attention and our responses: fight or flight. Float or flounder. They require

that we immediately find new ways of doing things that both break from and improve older templates. These new emergencies force us onto a steep learning curve. If we’re willing to face them, even through grief and loss, they can teach us vital lessons for navigating our climate and political futures.

Documenting and learning from what people have learned on the ground in such increasingly “unprecedented” events benefits us all. So, in December of 2024, BlueprintNC sent me and my intrepid driver, Schroder—chosen not only for her driving skills but also for being an excellent kickboxer—to Western North Carolina to explore this process.



MAP OF LOCATIONS VISITED IN THIS REPORT // By Andrew Meeker

How *DID* a Hurricane Get to the Mountains?

On September 28, 2024, Hurricane Helene raced across the Gulf of Mexico, where the water had been superheated to 85 degrees due to the ocean absorbing excess heat from the planet’s carbon overload. Between Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula and the Florida panhandle, Helene swelled rapidly from a Category One to a Category Four, then blew over land faster than its winds could weaken. Hitting the Appalachian Mountains, colder temperatures squeezed out the hyper-saturated clouds’ burden of water into hollers and creeks, little towns and cities, like Asheville, which were already saturated by rains. Then gravity caused all this water to rush down the mountains, with an increasing volume and velocity that no one could have anticipated.

Helene would bring more than 1.5 times the moisture to Western North Carolina than ever reported in the region: 3,000 kg per meter per second. The previous record was 1,888. At Mt Mitchell, the weather station registered 24.41 inches of rain, literally “off the charts.” The total accumulation was 40 trillion gallons. It was called a “flood of biblical proportions,” except that we have had too many “unprecedented” events lately. We simply need new measures.

Helene’s path included Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The death toll from Helene stands at 246, with 104 of those deaths in North Carolina.¹ It was the deadliest storm in North Carolina’s history and the worst in the US since Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

To answer our questions and get direct accounts from the most impacted areas, we drove from Durham to our first stop in Charlotte’s [SEAC village](#), a Blueprint partner and distribution center for mutual aid to WNC. We then drove to Asheville to speak with the staff of [Firestorm Books](#), Ayotunde Dixon at the [Racial Justice Coalition](#) (RJC), Riley Carter at the [Pansy Collective](#), Alan Ramirez at [Colaborativa La Milpa](#), and the volunteers at the [MADR Tool Library](#). I returned to WNC for a second visit in January of 2025, this time going to Marshall in Madison County to talk with organizers from [ROAR](#) (Rural Organizing and Resilience) and to Swannanoa in Buncombe County. Both of these small towns were hard hit by torrential floods and mudslides.

I also found PBS NC’s [Black Issues Forum](#) episode on hurricane relief quite helpful, especially its lengthy interview with the Whittington family, founders of [Democracy Green](#).² To quote the episode, “Birthed in the storm waters of Hurricane Florence [the organization continues] delivering life-saving rescue assistance, direct relief, and mutual aid and waging a statewide demand to state lawmakers to release critical disaster aid dollars.” For Democracy Green, the crisis of Hurricane Florence created a ‘long-term vision for justice ... for [our] communities and the need for democracy reform to achieve this justice... [in order to] weather every storm, whether natural disasters or human made.’”

1

One important factor evident across the interviews was the sense of “muscle memory” from previous disasters.

“Why did we know what to do when we did it?” one staff member of Firestorm Bookstore mused over supper after the vibrant store closed for the day, in a conversation that became about “muscle memory.” (Researchers show that muscle memory occurs when repetition with increasing frequency and intensity consolidates motor tasks into bodily memory.) Such a concept helps explain how mutual aid in one crisis, such as COVID, translates more readily into another, like a “hurricane in the mountains.”

But for older folk, Hurricane Katrina in 2005 remains the defining example of both climate disaster and government failure. It is a key moment that their bodies and memories still respond to in times of crisis. Once a climate disaster occurs, the established national and state responses are supposed to follow a pattern of “rescue, relief, and rebuilding.” The response is led by the National Guard, FEMA, and the Red Cross, followed by religious organizations and other non-profits. There are also individual and group efforts and people with first responder instincts who just get in a truck or a boat and go. But none of these can be assumed to be neutral in terms of whose lives are most important. In the aftermath of Katrina, New Orleans residents were left to fend for themselves in the Convention Center and Super Dome. In the days following, it was not deemed “safe” for the National Guard or



FIRESTORM BOOKSTORE GRAND RE-OPENING

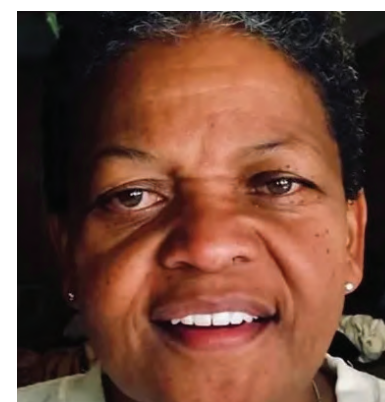
the Red Cross to enter the flooded city. Notably such security concerns did not stop available Guardsmen from being sent into Baghdad at the start of the Second Iraq War, which left Louisiana short of Guardsmen for disasters like Katrina.

Katrina was on the lips of Sofia Whittington, as her family began disaster preparedness for WNC Black communities, remembering Katrina’s awful example. Also, older volunteers ladling out soup in the Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR) “Tool Library” in Asheville cited Katrina as their wake-up call.

2

Political and climate crises will escalate in frequency and intensity, which requires muscles to “remember” how to respond.

This kind of memory is a resource for resilience that operates in parallel to, or in contradiction with, official state and NGO responses in marginalized communities already neglected or abused by the state. An example of this is Tai Little of SEAC Village, who canvassed their neighborhood to see what help the residents needed in response to the emerging disaster.



AYOTUNDE DIXSON OF RJC

The Racial Justice Coalition of Asheville (RJC) rapidly put “boots on the ground” to support their mission of addressing racism against Black people

and those “most impacted by poverty, criminalization, and mass incarceration.” In rented vans, RJC team members made runs to Greenville and Charlotte to bring essential supplies gathered from across the state to bring to Asheville’s public housing communities and long-established neighborhoods. They also conducted wellness checks at over 1,000 homes, providing warm blankets, relocating families where needed, and feeding over 1,600 people out of food trucks. During and after Helene, RJC’s work drew on the muscle memory of its coalition that in 2020,

made Asheville one of the first cities in the U.S. to commit to a local reparations process via a Community Reparations Commission as described in [Every Black Voice: Reparations Are Due](#).³

Volunteers at the Colaborativa La Milpa on Emma Street in Asheville worked out of an office near their free market, El Mercado, which is part of the organization’s program called the House of Mutual Aid or Casa de Apoyo Mutual. The market is open three afternoons a week and distributes clothes, food, household goods and supplies, diapers, and other infant needs. In the same space as El Mercado is the office of Consulta tu Compa, which is also part of the House of Mutual Aid. The office offers easily accessible case management for hurricane-related issues in addition to housing, employment, and immigration.⁴



TAI LITTLE AT SEAC VILLAGE IN CHARLOTTE // Photo by Mab Segrest

3

Western NC showed that having existing community spaces like co-ops, storage facilities, and tool libraries made it possible to mobilize quickly and effectively during the storm.

It was a community member who posted a “MEET HERE TOMORROW” sign at Firestorm Bookstore. The next day Asheville residents without power or potable water gathered. Over subsequent days, they began sharing information and resources, charging phones, and setting up mutual aid distribution points, even before they knew how the aid would arrive. SEAC Village had already shown us how they turned their office space into a distribution point for mutual aid in Asheville. Supplies were ferried in vans by groups like the Racial Justice Coalition, who also provided a mutual aid distribution point from the city’s YWCA.

Colaborativa La Milpa provided a powerful web of co-op structures that allowed Latino and other neighbors rapid access to resources. We visited Alan Ramirez at Colaborativa La Milpa’s free market, El Mercadito, in a hilly neighborhood above Asheville. Alan explained Colaborativa La Milpa is an umbrella organization that includes PODER Emma, four trailer cooperatives with a total of 60+ units; Raíces Emma, an arts and culture program; Mā hñākihu an indigenous language justice co-op; and El Telar, a child care co-op. There is also a trailer and home repair co-op that maintains or repairs these units



PODER EMMA TRAILER COOPERATIVE



COLABORATIVA LA MILPA AND PODER EMMA STAFF

even after storms such as Helene and a free market already in place that served as a distribution point for mutual aid.⁵

La Colaborativa’s website explains, “In 2018, our organizations officially united to implement a vision for greater cooperation and sustainability....[a]s a collective response for building capacity around fundraising, planning, evaluation, and coordinated strategic approaches.”

Talking with Alan, we saw how their 20 years of deep collaboration, which draws on Indigenous cultural habits and on histories of resistance in Central America,

is a model that could be useful across North Carolina. Commenting on how Helene was affecting his work plan, Alan said, “It’s a new type of working for me now of redistribution: unloading, moving boxes, and restocking shelves. We will be service providers for the Hispanic Community post-Helene in the coming months.”

Colaborativa La Milpa was able to provide seed money for a new mutual aid distribution warehouse in Swannanoa, a small town on I-40 east of Asheville that was also devastated by Hurricane Helene’s floods.

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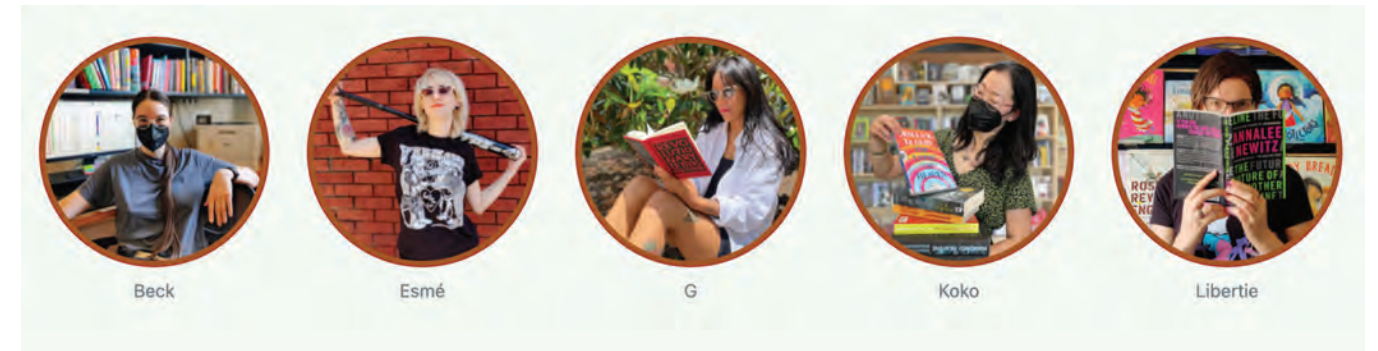
“Unprecedented” emergencies provided steep learning curves that organizers met, and part of their task involved rapidly learning the additional skills needed in new situations. Solving such challenges successfully provides unexpected joy for those who rise to the occasion and see their results support displaced and grieving people.

In Asheville, one crucial need was providing potable water because Helene flooded the city’s water processing center, which was also damaged by mud and storm debris. [The NGO Planet Water Foundation](#), which has responded to disasters in 17 countries on five continents, deployed its disaster response platform, an [Aqua Block Water Filtration System, in eight different locations across Asheville](#). This included BeWell located above the MADR Tool Library.⁶

The Planet Water staff worked at each location to get the system up and running and teach local volunteers how to run it. This meant having a generator to pump water from a well or stream into its filtration cube, so that the filtered water then flowed into a large “buffalo cube.” Residents could come to these sites to fill their own water containers or have them delivered in buffalo cubes to nearby neighborhoods. Locally, Jag Construction Company pitched in to help mobilize the system.



MADR TOOL LIBRARY



FIRESTORM BOOKSTORE STAFF

The Pansy Collective, Appalachian tranarchists working for liberation, brought a younger punk vibe into local efforts. This was reflected in Riley Carter’s interview on the *Live Like the World is Dying* podcast, published by Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness. As Riley explained, Pansy’s work exists at the “intersection of marginalizations.” Riley elaborated, “There’s something to the fact that subculture carries the flame when larger social movements have gone away”—or never arrived? In the tangled wilderness post-Helene, Pansy was ready to roll, focusing on redistribution of mutual aid and figuring out water systems.

Organizers at the Firestorm Bookstore, SEAC Village, and Colaborativa La Milpa also explained with pride how they had innovated so they could go to scale in the aftermath of the storm. Tai Little at SEAC Village observed, “People show up how they can with what tools, skills, and resources they have. For example, three people, three skills.” But, Tai added, “People living closest have to be the first responders because the government can’t respond in so many places at once as disasters unfold.” Tai shared her idea of developing a manual or “encyclopedia” that explains technical topics in plain language,

like how to test water safety. In Asheville, this would help the public understand key health measures while also supporting officials and businesses aiming to reopen for tourism. Tai added an increasingly pressing need, “We will also have to figure out relocation of people who can no longer live in disaster areas because they have lost their homes or income.”



BUFFALO CUBE TO STORE FILTERED WATER FROM CREEK

5

Despite the grief, dislocation, and devastation of a climate disaster, such learning curves and their acts of solidarity and cohesion produced an unexpected joy.

This feeling is what the staff of Firestorm Bookstore brought to the supper table conversation almost immediately when they were asked, “How are you?” Various staff members discussed how they experienced both the expected challenges and unexpected gratification that came from finding solutions in the face of the unprecedented disaster. “It’s hard to know what I am feeling,” said the first person to speak, explaining the swing between being a “victim” and feeling weirdly freed from the ordinary requirements and routines of everyday life in order to do life-saving work.



RACIAL JUSTICE COALITION OF ASHEVILLE VOLUNTEERS

Another colleague elaborated, “I wasn’t nervous about my well-being. There were food and clothes on every corner.” Because a sense of community and access to resources were normalized in the disaster, they said, “I felt both exhaustion and rejoiceful at the work we were doing, and from being around people every day.” Another colleague added a “favorite thing” about the hurricane: “There was no time for bullshit, no time to waste.” Another elaborated, “I was surprised by the fragility of the infrastructure for electricity and water.” A colleague from Miami, very used to hurricanes, articulated their “grief over land forever changed.” Another observed that when towers were down, as they were in Asheville, many people did not realize how widespread storm damage was until they got cell service back. They found an increased ability to focus and be in the present, something that is usually made difficult by social media saturation in unstormed times.

All agreed that they had “a brief window of opportunity [so they recommended] *don’t waste time, get into action.*” In fact, they realized that mapping out Day 1, Day 2, Day 3, and so on, in retrospect, would be helpful.

6

Unprecedented crises are tests of our solidarity and how “mutual” the aid really is.

Colaborativa La Milpa’s free market, El Mercadito, based in the Latino community, was open to anyone in need who came. RJC’s Ayotunde Dixon observed class dynamics in rescue and relief efforts: “We were taking things to centers in poor communities, both Black and white. [But] the classism between poor and middle-class white people amazes me. White social workers have often never been around poor white people—including coal miners, pig farmers, and sharecroppers—and treat them badly.”

But she added a cautionary note, “I also found that white people can ‘turn white’ pretty quick—that trust thing where you leave me stranded by myself. America is a piece of work.”

Ayotunde’s response to food distribution in Asheville was positive. “The beautiful thing is that Asheville is small, but millions of people come through as tourists, and they sent us stuff because they had fallen in love with the mountains. And we farmed it out to less famous places like Boone, Rutherford County, or Tennessee.”



ALAN RAMIREZ AT EL MERCADITO AT PODER EMMA



Little Towns, Big Hearts in a Big Flood

In late January, on a return trip to Western North Carolina, Riley Carter drove me up to [Marshall](#) in [Madison County](#), twenty minutes north of Asheville, to talk with Matt Wallace and Jazz Maltz from Rural Organizing and Resilience (ROAR). When Helene’s mudslides and floods hit Marshall and Barnardsville, ROAR volunteers had already spent the previous decade leading projects like firewood mutual aid, free community meals, and support for farmers of color. They also launched a free seed library, provided resources for local teachers and students, and worked on broader community development efforts. These projects embody ROAR’s mission to “grow understanding and solidarity between all of those who call these mountains home,” as their pamphlet explained.

Driving over to rural north Buncombe County, 30 miles east of Barnardsville, Jazz joined Matt, Riley, and me. The three white guys compared notes on what their “disaster learnings” had been.

Matt recalled the Marshall timeline: Thursday-Friday floods, Monday first meetings, and Tuesday, a hub up and running. Jazz remembered that even though he and his partner had downplayed the seriousness of the coming storm, he did have the presence of mind to bring their daughter home from a sleepover that Thursday night. He remembered emerging on Friday to the surreal sense of sunshine revealing massive damage. “How did it move so fast?” he wondered. Both communities

would find themselves cut off: Interstates 40 and 26 were both seriously damaged, as were smaller roads leading in and out of the counties. Back in the hollers, old people were cut off for a week. They were blowing whistles to signal where they were so that their neighbors could find and rescue them.

Faced with this hyper-local environment, in Barnardsville (population 559), people used the public space of the US post office for their first meeting. At that meeting someone declared, “We are going to cook a hot meal tomorrow.” They set up a kitchen and a first aid table in the post office on that first day. Shortly after, they moved to an old fire station because it had more space than the post office. Additionally, a medical team rapidly came together, including local nurse practitioners and other medical providers who lived in the community.

Because the grid was down in Madison, as it was in Asheville, people did not realize the extent of the regional damage until their cell phones came back on. In many rural areas, broadband internet is not available. In spite of some organizers’ cautions about Elon Musk and SpaceX, [Starlink](#) is sometimes the only way to get an internet connection.⁷ A few people in Marshall or Barnardsville who had Starlink were able to provide early local access, which was useful if cell phones or computers were charged. A community member took the email addresses of local people to the library in Asheville and sent messages to those on the list, letting them know that their loved ones were safe.

Finding alternatives in rural areas to Starlink and more stable communications systems for emergencies is a significant need.⁸

Matt picked up the Madison County story: “We took supplies to four counties (Mitchell, Buncombe, Avery, and Yancy) and received hot meals in every one when we arrived.” Madison County had potable water available much sooner than Asheville did because of the prevalence of springs and wells in rural areas. Consequently, the ROAR folks in Marshall and Barnardsville could send water to PODER Emma and housing projects in Asheville that had not yet received any.

But some rural lessons were also similar to those from Asheville. Matt explained: “Not having the internet worked to our advantage. The disaster broke its spell and gave us a different sense of reality and (affirmed a communal sense of human nature).”

Disaster Cash Flows: Venmo + Bank Account

Generally, rural and urban communities relied on small in-person fundraisers. But for Helene, they also found their efforts went viral through their extended online contacts. Businesses and homes in Marshall are close to the French Broad River’s sandy banks, so the water spread fast and fiercely. Cell phone videos recorded dramatic scenes of drastic damage as flood waters, trees, and other debris poured downhill, causing damage that went viral on Facebook and Instagram. These posts reached even international audiences, including organizers of a square dance in Montreal and a bar in Missoula. Over time, funds sent to Marshall totaled \$500,000.



JAZZ MALTZ AT THE ROAR HUB IN MARSHALL // Photo by Mab Segrest

Because funds were coming in so quickly, ROAR had to act fast by setting up an organizational bank account and securing a fiscal sponsor, Holler Harm Reduction. Matt and Jazz strongly recommend that groups who might fundraise online have these supports in place. Committed to local community care, ROAR redistributed money rapidly via checks to residents whose homes were destroyed or damaged along the river. Other forms of mutual aid, such as food, clothing, and cleaning supplies, were passed back and forth and sideways within the disaster areas.

Response and relief from “hyper-local” environments post-Helene were seat-of-the-pants work that required innovative and immediate responses to literally save lives.

Disaster’s Rhythms and the Adrenaline Window

Asked about the “adrenaline window” of WORK*EAT*BREATH *SLEEP*RINSE-AND REPEAT that many experienced, Matt and Riley agreed that it lasted about two weeks before people started to crash. But fortunately, relief began to arrive about two weeks after Helene hit. Matt remembered being moved to tears when he first saw trucks, from across North Carolina and the nation, loaded with materials rumble down somewhat repaired roads into town. Jazz remembered that local businesses had mobilized their heavy equipment to clear and repair roads. In fact, they met NC Department of Transportation repair crews, who were surprised at how far they’d already gotten toward town.

Riley commented on one of the longer-term realities that Pansy members confronted daily: “Queer people have worked to ‘save the world’—but who will save queer and

trans people? We were already in a crisis in Western North Carolina. There is a huge trans community here. We are now focusing on trans community defense, with open carry trainings and an abolitionist approach to suicide prevention – finding people who are willing and able to sit with folks who are having a bad time without calling the police.” As marginalized people know in our bones, the real “disaster” is racism, sexism, class systems, and trans- and homophobia. A disaster such as Helene just piles on to those systemic disasters.

“What do you think of FEMA?” I asked. They agreed that [people’s claims](#) are being denied, and they have the right to be angry for many reasons, including being paid only \$15,000 for the complete destruction of their home. They also noted that insurance companies and FEMA pay differently for water and wind damages, often passing the buck to the other agency so that neither pays. Riley: “The solution is not to defund FEMA but that there is not enough money.”



SUPPLIES AT THE ROAR HUB IN MARSHALL // Photo by Mab Segrest



Conclusion

More than half a year after Hurricane Helene struck Western North Carolina, the reflections shared here by courageous and resourceful organizers offer more than just a record of what happened. These on-the-ground lessons, forged in real time and under immense pressure, represent practices that can be studied, adapted, and strengthened for future disasters in Western North Carolina and other locations. This lived wisdom turns into additional muscle memory for local organizers and is a powerful tool for resilience. This pattern of response during moments of shock and grief highlights what Tai, Matt, Jazz, Riley, Ayotunde, and Alan all articulated: the need for solidarity from day one and a renewed belief in basic human decency as a foundation for rebuilding. This optimism does not mean that there are not also

deeply embedded malignant forces at work, the possible “boogaloos in the mountains,” who, if given the opportunity, would take our communities and this history in very different directions. But we now know that in disaster situations we can help one another as neighbors and allies in spite of our differences. The divides being spread among us are as disastrous as the torrential floods and mudslides that came down the mountain.

Matt’s reflections echoed the Firestorm staff, “This practice of collective community care is the opposite of the individualism that makes you think that you have to arm yourself, fight off ‘looters’ and ‘enemies.’ Or that this individualism is ‘human nature,’ fed by the fear-based propaganda of apocalyptic religion and survivalism.” Jazz agreed: “It was validation that people are essentially good and want to help. Everyone threw down, and I found that I had a lot in common with people I had never interacted with.”

And in the memory of all those beloved friends and relatives who lost their lives in the storm.



Our thanks go to those people who shared these experiences with us, who know that they represent hundreds of fellow humans who “call these mountains home.” Our hearts and resources continue to go out to all who suffered this unprecedented disaster, and who are determined to rebuild their homes and communities. We also append an abbreviated list of these resources and ideas.

My thanks to Irene Hall, a member of the Pansy Collective who introduced me to Riley and headed me towards ROAR; my old friends Steph Guilloud of Project South and Suzanne Pharr of Southern Movement Assembly, who have given me feedback and encouragement; all my colleagues at BlueprintNC; my driver and companion Schroder on the first trip; and to my collaborator Sofia Trovato who provided our own “mutual aid.” As I was learning to negotiate my “dry eye” limits on screen time, Sofia served as a typist, syntax collaborator, research assistant, and comrade-in-text. Andrew Meeker’s expert cartography was gifted to us in his map of Western NC. And to Rebekah Miel at Miel Creative for her meticulous editing and beautiful design.

A LIST FOR YOUR FRIDGE OF KEY TAKEAWAYS

Essential Tools & Infrastructure

VENMO + LINKED BANK ACCOUNT + FISCAL SPONSOR = fast financial agility. Posts that go viral can flood you with donations, but you need supporting infrastructure. ROAR and Pansy were able to turn money around fast to support people in need.

Check out *SEED COMMONS: A Community Wealth Cooperative* to understand how co-ops might benefit your community with their non-extractive lending priorities, community control, and worker power. “We periodically open applications for network membership, and are always excited to hear about potential candidate organizations.”

Website: <https://seedcommons.org/contact>

Address: 228 Park Avenue Suite 65768, New York, New York 10003-1502

For their work with PODER EMMA see <https://www.poderemma.org/home>.

Reliable communications are vital when cell towers are down. Early on, many residents set out to find each other, respond to the whistles signaling someone was stranded, or gather where a neighbor had STARLINK. The Starlink GEN 3 provides up to 500GB across ten cell phones, covering 2,000 feet. It costs \$349 initially for two months, then \$165 per month, for \$2,329 per year before taxes. Preferable would be wider provision of broad band internet into rural communities so that they do not rely on SpaceX. Website: <https://www.starlink.com/us>

Potable water is also essential when county and city systems are compromised. Planet Water Foundation Disaster Response Platforms for AquaBlock Filtration Systems was on the scene in WNC to provide filtration cubes and instructions on their use.

Email: info@planet-water.org

Phone: +1 (877) 711-3083

Website: <https://planet-water.org/disaster-response-clean-drinking-water>



PLANET WATER AQUABLOCK

Key Takeaways Continued

Community Resilience & Preparedness

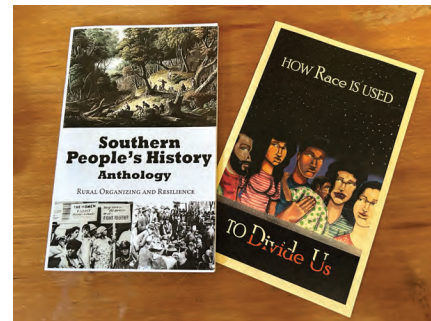
“Don’t Waste Day 1.” The first 24 hours after a disaster are crucial. Begin organizing immediately, even before official aid arrives and when official responses are offline or you are cut off.

“Meet here tomorrow” (e.g., the sign at Firestorm Bookstore on Day 1) is a powerful organizing principle, underscoring the importance of physical gathering that can become a point of connection, relief and organizing.

Use Public Spaces, they are critical infrastructure especially when storms isolate communities.

Get Ready to Stay Ready with collective resources like the MADR Tool Library that are also on hand for disaster repair. But also strengthen preparedness by building up relationships of solidarity and mutual trust. (See the ROAR pamphlets as examples.)

Three People with Three Skills might arrive at the door so make use of them all. Small teams with diverse skills can mobilize quickly when bureaucracies are offline or far away. Act directly.



ROAR PAMPHLETS

Cultural & Strategic Wisdoms

Inventory your assets. Start with what’s local: skills, tools, land, contacts, knowledge.

Mutual Aid is more effective than top-down aid in emergencies because it is closer to the crisis and knows the local terrain and people. When the aid trucks do roll in, they are very welcome.

Narrative matters. Catchphrases and visual messages (“bumper sticker wisdom”) help create shared identity and focus amid chaos.

Rescue and relief are only the first stages. Long-term transformation requires funding, organizing, cooperation and earned trust that continues after the immediate emergency ends.

Endnotes

1. “Helene was one of the deadliest storms in recent history. How it devastated the Southeast” USA Today, December 31, 2024. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/graphics/2024/12/31/hurricane-helene-how-the-deadly-storm-devastated-the-southeast/77179217007/>. Also see “Effects of Hurricane Helene in North Carolina.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Effects_of_Hurricane_Helene_in_North_Carolina. Accessed 19 May 2025.
2. “Western North Carolina Hurricane Relief Efforts,” *Black Issues Forum*, Season 39, Episode 12, aired 1/13/2025. <https://www.pbs.org/video/western-north-carolina-hurricane-recovery-efforts-so8rtx/>
3. The RJC meets with proposals and development from five Impact Focus Areas: criminal justice, economic development, education, health and wellness, and housing. Racial Justice Coalition of Asheville, *Every Black Voice: Reparations are Due*, June 2024. <https://www.rjcavl.org/reparations-are-due/>.
4. <https://www.colaborativamilpa.org/>.
5. Colaborativa La Milpa includes PODER Emma for community development, House of Mutual Aid, House of Culture, and CIMA for immigrants’ rights. For a powerful explanation of these structures and history, see <https://seedcommons.org/projects/cooperatives-and-community-power-poder-emma-and-the-fight-against-displacement-in-asheville-nc>.
6. Planet Water Foundation Disaster Response, <https://planet-water.org/disaster-response-clean-drinking-water>, see video about their work in and around Asheville.
7. STARLINK is satellite internet constellation operated by Starlink Services LLC and owned by Elon Musk’s SpaceX. In February 2025, Starlink had 5,000,000 subscribers across 125 countries, territories and global markets. In 2024 Starlink operated off of 7,000 small satellites in low earth orbit (LEO), anticipating rapid expansion. Residents in rural areas with little connectivity often purchase Starlink, which proves useful in disasters as well. The Starlink GEN 3 provides 500GB that will serve ten cell phones and cover 2,000 feet. GEN3 equipment costs \$349, according to its website chatbot, at \$165 per month (for \$2,329 before taxes). <https://www.starlink.com/us>. In emergencies it is free for two months, then there is a “trial subscription with monthly fee.”
8. Galaen Bacharier, “Western NC went offline during Helene. Can the state stay connected in future disasters?” *NC Newsline*, March 21, 2025. <https://ncnewsline.com/2025/03/31/western-nc-went-offline-during-helene-can-the-state-stay-connected-in-future-disasters/>.

“This practice of collective community care is the opposite of the individualism that makes you think that you have to arm yourself, fight off ‘looters’ and ‘enemies.’ Or that this individualism is ‘human nature,’ fed by the fear-based propaganda of apocalyptic religion and survivalism.”

- *Matt, ROAR*



With our partners, Blueprint NC works
towards inclusive and anti-racist democracy
rooted in civic engagement through
movement building and mobilization.
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