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Helping Hands of the Community

by **Lisa Dawson** in [Health, Profiles](#)[Bookmark](#)

In Frisco, we are blessed beyond measure to have a Fire Department that is always ready to step up and do whatever necessary to keep our community safe. It is their mission to protect our residents, and the team does an outstanding job at it. However, their important role in other communities, as well as the importance of establishing relationships with other fire and rescue departments, cannot be overlooked!

While most of us watched the news anxiously from afar, Frisco Fire Department Chief Mark Piland began getting requests to assist our Houston neighbors even before Hurricane Harvey made landfall in the middle of the Texas coast on August 25, 2017. Prior to the record rainfall and catastrophic flooding, Chief Piland and his team were en route to Houston with the department's AmBus, strike teams, trained disaster personnel and a commitment to do whatever it took to save lives and help in whatever way possible during and after Harvey's rampage.

For years, meteorologists have been warning of an "it is not a matter of if, but when" hurricane scenario for the Texas coast. The last major Texas hurricane was Celia in August 1970. Harvey caused much more devastation. Weather experts have classified Harvey as a 1,000-year flood event, dumping more than 50 inches of rain and sustained winds of 110 miles per hour. It was a rapidly-intensifying storm, growing from a tropical depression to a major hurricane in 40 hours.

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The Frisco Fire Department was gearing up to help Houston while Harvey was gaining strength off the coast. “People probably do not realize how far in advance these assets are staged,” says Chief Piland. “We started getting these requests from the Texas Emergency Management State Operations Center (SOC) on August 24, 24-36 hours prior to Harvey making landfall in the US. The federal system calls this ‘leaning forward.’ We are not waiting until the disaster happens before we move down range to help. We are actively preparing beforehand and providing resources where they are needed.”

The first unit to be sent was the department's multi-patient vehicle or an “AmBus.” The specially-designed bus can transport up to 18 patients and crew members at a time. The bus was sent to San Antonio where it was grouped with other AmBuses from across the state. It was then sent to Corpus Christi to stand by for needed evacuations. It was later moved to Beaumont to assist with a field hospital and emergency evacuations from that region.

In total, more than 45 fire department personnel were sent to Houston and five strike teams were launched to assist Houston with its disaster efforts. Requests for strike teams come from the Texas Intrastate Fire Mutual Aid System (TIFMAS). Frisco's Special Operations Chief Shannon Brinton played an integral role in launching the strike forces. “It is a huge coordination piece,” explains Chief Piland. “TIFMAS and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) are the two state organizations that coordinate together in these types of disasters.”

Chief Brinton, who has been with the Frisco Fire Department for 18 years, was involved in managing and coordinating the deployment of the teams. “We pushed four strike teams out of Frisco. Some of our team members stayed in actual fire stations in the Houston area and were running 911 calls for them,” he says.

Operational Battalion Chief Jeromy Porter was just one of the many Frisco Fire Department team members in Houston immediately following the storm. He recalls a swift water rescue with another Frisco team member, Josh Clay, the Field Incident Technician. They were travelling to an assignment on Interstate 10 when Chief Porter saw a man in distress on a pontoon boat. “I was looking out my window the entire time we were driving. I saw a guy over in the trees in his boat. We pulled over and I shouted loudly over the sound of the water to ask if he was okay,” says Chief Porter. “He signaled back no. I stopped our task force and told them to get ready for a swift water rescue. They threw a bag to him. He was maybe 100 yards off the road. He grabbed the bag, tied himself off and we got a boat to go into the water. We found a rescue team out of Calif. with two vans pulling jet skis and, luckily, these folks were trained to do this. I asked if they would go into the water. A female rescue swimmer floated over to him, loaded him on the jet ski and hauled him out. After we got him on land, he wanted to know if we were going to get his boat, but he was very thankful.”

Chief Porter says, more than anything, he remembers the volume of water during his seven days in Houston after Harvey. “It was just an incredible amount of water dumped into these areas. The magnitude of the flooding was unbelievable. It was very strange seeing entire buildings under water.”

The department had several units that were deployed in support of Hurricane Harvey. The department sent a high-wheel engine on August 26 that was assigned to the Santa Fe area. It was tasked with high water rescues as Hurricane Harvey continued to dump inches of rain into the area. On August 28, another task force was sent to this area, this time led by Chief Porter. The crew was initially sent to the greater Houston area, but rapidly was transitioned to move east as the storm made a second U.S. landfall on the Texas-Louisiana border. The team was stationed in the Greater Beaumont area for two weeks. The department also sent two personnel to assist with incident command for the region, as a special request from the State Emergency Manager. On August 31, they began replacing crews that were located at various spots within the region. The last crew to return home returned on September 19. In total, the Frisco Fire Department had personnel in place in South Texas from August 24 to September 19. Other city departments also responded to Harvey, including the Frisco Police Department, City Communications and building inspectors, just to name a few.

Chief Piland proudly describes how many members of the department wanted to go to Houston to help. Despite the horrific storm and dangerous conditions, Fire Department members were requesting to help our Houston friends. “The Frisco Fire Department is here to help and is thankful that the city not only allows the department to help, but supports its efforts to do so. Firefighters, by nature, want to help, so it is no surprise we had several people volunteer to go help,” says Captain Kevin Haines, Administrative Services. “It is the spirit of both Texas and the



Central Texas Trauma Regional Advisory Council (NCTTRAC) and TIFMAS. Both of these entities helped organize the response to Hurricane Harvey.”

“This is what they train for,” says Chief Piland, referring to his team. “And they are needed. I am very proud of the entire team — the ones who went there and the ones who stayed here.” Captain Haines echoes the chief’s sentiments. When asked why he thinks so many were eager to head straight into the fierce storm and dangerous conditions, instead of staying safe in North Texas, his reply is simple, but poignant: “This is our craft. We just want to practice our craft. It is what we are trained to do.”

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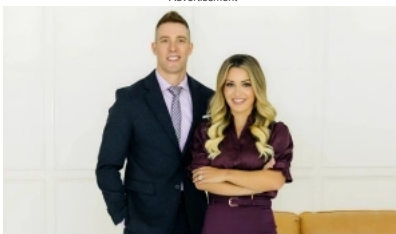
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When I was 7 years old, I knew what I wanted for Christmas. I had my heart set on the new Johnny Lightning 500 Track Set. For those of you not familiar with the new Johnny Lightning 500, it was, in my 7-year-old estimation, a far superior option than the run-of-the-mill Hot Wheels® all my friends had. I had vivid dreams of the stunning races I would stage on that amazing track. They would be just like the one I saw on the commercials. I wanted it so bad I could practically taste it!

Confident this was the gift that would make my life complete, I put in my request to my parents and started to count down the days until the big morning. Christmas arrived and I ran downstairs to see if my dreams would be fulfilled. In my house, my parents had specific rules about Christmas morning. We were allowed to open our stockings when we woke up, but that was it until everyone was up. Even worse, there was no present opening until we had breakfast. So, all I could do in the early hours of that Christmas morning was open my stocking, size up the packages around the tree and make my best guess.

Then came the waiting — through the stockings, my mom's healthy breakfast and all the small gifts that had to be opened (one at a time) before any of the big presents could be unveiled. Finally, my moment arrived. I took my biggest present and tore off the paper. And there, in the middle of the living room, was ... not the new Johnny Lightning 500. I do not remember what I did get, but I can still recall the feeling of disappointment. I had set myself up with great expectations and then did not get what I wanted.

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Christmas can be a stressful time for many of us. Like I did when I was 7, we so often set ourselves up with unrealistic expectations of getting the perfect present, having the perfect family celebration or hoping for a specific reaction when we give what we believe is the perfect gift. The problem with each of these expectations is that they require other people to behave according to our unspoken plans. My parents did not want me to be disappointed that Christmas when I was 7, but they did not realize I wanted that certain race track as much as I did. Or, maybe, it was too expensive. Or, perhaps, they thought it was a passing fad.

The same is true of family gatherings. We picture in our minds that everyone will be happy and grateful and cooperative. But, some years, family members show up to family celebrations stressed, depressed, angry or worried. And they do not meet our expectations. It is the challenge of all celebrations — how we feel about them is often dependent on other people behaving in ways we do not control. And, when that happens, we set ourselves up for disappointment and frustration.

However, the true message of Christmas and its deep impact on us is not dependent on how others are feeling, on how others behave or even on how we are feeling or behaving. The story of Christmas is about what God is doing in our midst.

The story of Christmas is set in a most stressful time when everybody felt out of control. In the Gospel of Luke, we read that a decree went out from Emperor Augustus demanding all the world be enrolled in a census. Everyone's anxiety goes up when we live under the weight of decrees, whether they come from the government, our jobs or our family. None of us like command performances. Everyone in ancient Palestine was on the move and no one had the choice to stay home. It did not matter where you lived, if you had an illness or if you were days away from delivering a baby. A decree went out and you had to go.

It was in the midst of this tremendous turmoil and stress that God joined us in the difficulty of life. One of the names that we give to Jesus is "Immanuel." The name Immanuel means "God with us." God is not with us only when we are happy, successful or healthy. The promise of Christmas is that God is with us in every time and in every circumstance. God does not enter the world because we are ready or because we deserve it. God enters the world because God loves us and wants to be with us in all the demands and disappointments of life.

When I was 43 years old, I wanted something very different for Christmas. I wanted my wife Linda to be well. Just a month before, Linda was diagnosed with breast cancer. In early December, she had a double mastectomy and she was scheduled to start chemotherapy the day after Christmas. The doctors told us she had a good chance of being cured of cancer, but there were no guarantees. In the days leading up to Christmas, I felt like our whole family was living under a decree. We had never experienced such stress. Christmas came and went, and like the Christmas when I was 7, I did not get what I wanted. It would take another eight months of grueling treatments. Now, 10 years later, Linda's prognosis is excellent!

But, while I did not get what I wanted that Christmas, I did get what I needed. In the birth of the Christ child, I experienced God with me. I knew God knew my family's fear and our uncertainty and our pain. We did not know how things would work out, but we knew God would be with us, no matter what.

This Christmas, my prayer for you is that, whether or not you receive what you want, you receive what you need — the presence of God in your everyday life. When we experience that, the disappointments and frustrations of life no longer have the power to derail us from what is truly important. And we experience a deep joy that comes from being held by a God who loves us enough to become like us.

Reverend Dan Anderson-Little is the pastor of Legacy Presbyterian Church.

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