



Staff photos

Yet another pier, this one at Bayside Shores, is twisted



Laird and Thelma Harrington at Bayside cleaning up



Back of beach house at Whichard's is damaged



Deborah Mutherspaw, mgr. at Whichard's, vacuums up water



Francis Jump of Swan Point bends over ruined carpeting

# Belhaven, Whichard's Beach grow weary of putting storm cleanup lessons into practice

By Russell Woolard  
News Editor

At places like Belhaven and Whichard's Beach, every storm brings a new lesson. But the people who live in those areas must wish they didn't have so many chances to put what they've learned into practice.

When initial reports indicated Hurricane Dennis might strike the North Carolina coast late last month, area residents got ready in a way that has become all too familiar. At O'Neal's Drug Store in Belhaven,

all the merchandise was moved upstairs - and was moved down a few days later, when the storm stalled off the coast.

"This one worked me a little harder," said Bud O'Neal, owner of the pharmacy.

Even when Dennis began turning back toward the area early Saturday, many thought the storm would be relatively mild, since it had been downgraded to a tropical storm and forecaster were predicting minimal flooding. So Deborah Mutherspaw, manager of Whichard's Beach near

Chocowinity, decided to wait out the storm with her husband in the main beach house. There seemed no reason not to.

"They told us we weren't going to have but two feet of water, so we figured that would put about a foot of water in this building," Ms. Mutherspaw said. "We'd never stayed through a storm before, but this time we said, 'It's not going to be that bad.' So we stayed."

And with a harrowing night behind them, and many weeks of cleanup ahead, Ms. Mutherspaw and

other business owners and residents of Beaufort County's low-lying areas have been reminded again that storms like Dennis can't be trusted to do what the forecasters say.

"It's going to take me a month to clean it all up, I think," said Laird Harrington a resident of Bayside Shores, as he surveyed the effects of water and wind damage to his garage and yard. "I've got the power back on and the water on, and now we're going to have to start working on the walls."

For longtime residents of Belhaven and Whichard's Beach, keeping up and coping with the alternate calm and stormy periods isn't easy. There was a cluster of storms in the 1950s, the most devastating being Hurricane Hazel in 1954, and a relative period of calm between Hurricane Ginger in 1971 and Hurricane Bertha in 1996. And after Bertha came Hurricane Fran and Tropical Storm Josephine, both in 1996. Hurricane Bonnie struck in 1998. And now, Dennis.

But in Whichard's Beach and Belhaven, they're simply sweeping out the mud, cleaning up the mess and salvage whatever they can. They like living near the water, have been there almost all their lives, and seem to accept nature's tempests as the price they must pay to enjoy a lifestyle that is dear to their hearts.

"We'd rather it wouldn't be, but we've always loved the water, both of us," said Thelma Harrington, Laird's wife. "It is discouraging, but you keep looking up...I guess we forget about this when we think of the other days of the year that are so pretty."

All the same, Dennis won't be forgotten anytime soon - and one thing people may remember is how unpredictable the storm was. Dennis took a long time to make landfall, and once it arrived, it stayed longer than many expected it to. The result was a lot of water. O'Neal said there were at least 27 inches of water in his store, and Ms. Motherspaw estimated at least 10 feet of water sloshed around the bottom part of the beach house, accompanied by storm surges of about six feet.

And the water wreaked havoc in a lot of places. At the Harrington's house, a pickup truck and a Lincoln were parked side by side in the garage. By the time the storm was over, they were badly scratched, the result of being battered around by the water that rushed in.

"It had more water than we had during Fran or Bertha," Harrington said. "And it lasted a lot longer. It stayed here all night. They kept saying it was going to go away by midnight. But two or three o'clock in the morning, that truck and that Lincoln were sitting inside there, and they were still

floating and banging against the house all night long."

When the storm finally abated, the Harringtons found several machines, including a 1,000-pound planer and a 4,000-pound milling machine, had been moved several feet, and a gray trailer had been moved and landed with such force that the wheels were sunk several inches in the dirt. At Whichard's Beach, the marina building, the back side of the beach building and the water slide were all lost, and the campground was without water or electricity. Ms. Motherspaw doesn't have an estimate of the damage, but she knows it will take a long time and a lot of money before the facility is back to where it normally is.

"Put it like this: We're still paying off the others," Ms. Motherspaw said. "We haven't got out of debt from the others, and this will probably set us back about five years financially. It's bad."

Which, in many minds, may beg the question: How much more can you take? The question brings a chuckle from Ms. Motherspaw, followed by a philosophical reply.

"Now if you had asked me that Saturday, I might have liked to have said, 'This is it, I'm getting out,' she said. "That was the initial shock of it all. But it's our livelihood...I feel like if I were to go to Greenville or Wilson or somewhere and try to live, a tornado could hit me. Another catastrophe of some sort (could happen)."

A big part of the recovery process for many is the help of family and friends in the cleanup. Many business

owners and residents rely on family to do much of the work, which would be too expensive for them if they had to hire contractors. It's especially helpful to O'Neal, who faced damage not only to his Main Street business, but also to his house on Water Street that he bought a year ago - although having a 12-foot elevation on the house helped minimize the damage there.

O'Neal jokes that he would move his business or his home "if the government wants a buyout of downtown Belhaven." But he, like others who live and work near the water, accept storms as a fact of life and move on.

"If you're enjoying being near the water, you have to get used to it," he said. "I'd rather be close to the water 360 days a year, and the other five be bad. I could move to the bypass, but this is just part of our town."