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News Release

Smithsonian Institution Teams Rescued Family Treasures and Tales

COLUMBIA, S.C. – At the Conway Disaster Recovery Center, Stacy Bowe and Melissa Miller listened carefully to personal stories as they helped people salvage family heirlooms damaged by Hurricane Florence. They are part of the Heritage Emergency National Task Force, a partnership of 58 national service organizations and federal agencies co-sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution and FEMA who are traveling through areas of South Carolina demonstrating how to salvage storm-damaged heirlooms including photos, documents, artwork, quilts, and other keepsakes.

“If there’s one thing the Smithsonian understands, it’s that your personal belongings are important to you,” says Bowe. “Keepsakes help tell stories and our salvage efforts help keep the family stories alive. Salvage is a sign of recovery. You are protecting materials from further damage. It buys you time until you can get back to them.” For example, Bowe recommends stashing damaged books in the freezer to stop mold. To find more resources to save family treasures, visit the [Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative](#).

Keeping his word

Seven-year-old Jacob Rice thought the worst part of Hurricane Florence was when the water rushed over the porch and into his house. The family had to evacuate their home in rural Conway by rowboat. Jacob and his grandfather, Jeff Arsenault, asked the salvage team for help with a six-foot-long sideboard with leaded glass doors that has been in the family for three generations. It is made from tiger maple, an extremely hard wood with a distinctive wavy pattern. It was too heavy to move before the hurricane and ended up half-submerged in floodwater.

“I gave my uncle my word 20 years ago that I would keep it in the family, and I’m going to keep my word,” said Arsenault. “It’s already got an orange mold on it, but it has a lot of sentimental value.”

Bowe responded, “We’re all about sentimental value here.” She began by telling him to wear rubber gloves when dealing with water-damaged items because “you never know what was in the water.” Then she gave him a simple recipe for fighting mold on personal items: two tablespoons of white vinegar to a quart of water. Spray it on, sop it up with a sponge, and repeat. Test first, though on an inconspicuous area, and dry slowly out of the sun. More detailed advice is available online at: go.usa.gov/xPEua.

Arsenault said Jacob will help him fix the sideboard and one day may own it if they are able to salvage the heirloom.

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Quilted memories

A woman sought help from Bowe and Miller to salvage ten quilts that had been made by her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. Through her tears, she told how some of the quilt pieces were made from clothes her grandmother had made for her. She refused to part with them—to her they represented her maternal lineage. Bowe told her to wear rubber gloves and hand wash them gently in clean water, then showed her how to lay them out on clean towels or bedsheets, place cheesecloth on top, and use a paint roller to press moisture out without harming the quilts. Then she showed her how to hang-dry the quilts over a rod covered with foam insulation to protect the quilt from staining.

The test of a marriage

Anna Marie King and her husband consider Hurricane Florence the greatest test of their 41-year marriage. Despite life's ups and downs and building a house along the Intercoastal Waterway in Myrtle Beach three years ago, it was their hurried efforts to move valuables out of harm's way and the many decisions they have had to make about the serious storm damage to their home that have stressed them the most. The marriage will remain solid; the house, not so much.

Before Florence arrived, King and her husband packed up photo albums, videos, art, and other valuables and took them to the second floor of their home. They moved kitchen appliances and furniture into storage. Now they know that 20 inches of water flooded their home, ruining floors and drywall. And with the power out for weeks, King asked Bowe and Miller what she should expect when she checks out her photos and valuables on the second floor. Mold and mildew. Bowles loaded her up with handouts that provide extensive mold- and mildew-fighting resources and Miller reminded her to get some rubber gloves.

King was also concerned about her neighbors and their families. She got teary talking about her neighbor's daughter who is an artist and the damage to her paintings. Bowe and Miller made sure she received a schedule of Smithsonian workshops to share with her neighbors.

Looking to the future

Hurricane Florence may have spared Genevieve King Gattis of Aynor, S.C., but she lost family photographs and treasures to earlier storms and a house fire.

"I was always upset the most about losing my children's pictures. I would not leave my precious photos in my house ever again—maybe in a bank vault," she told Bowe and Miller. "How can I show my daughter what her life was like?" she asked, tears rising.

As they sit together talking beside a table stacked with demonstration models for cleaning fabrics, photos, wood objects, and other items, Bowe and Miller showed her how to soak photos when they become wet and stuck together.

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Quilted memories***

Walter Hill, the director of the Horry County Museum in Conway has a special reason to appreciate salvaging storm damaged heirlooms and especially for the methods for protecting them before the next storm. In South Carolina, he warned, there will always be a next one.

“At the museum, we collect objects from within the Horry County community to tell the history of the county,” he said. “So, if you preserve an heirloom right, it may someday be museum-worthy.”

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