Hurricane Michael: Returning to a city that no longer exists
By Hugo Bachega BBC News, Mexico Beach, Florida - 19/10/2018
Photographs by Hugo Bachega

Families have returned to Mexico Beach, a Florida town devastated by Hurricane Michael last week. Many are finding their homes in ruins; others, no home at all.

The scream was heard from a distance - "Look!" - and Jaques Sebastiao, broom in his hand, quickly walked through the rubble that was once the family’s home in Mexico Beach to where his wife, Bela, pointed to the ground.

"It's Mother Teresa," she euphorically told him, and picked the small, surprisingly unbroken, statue of the saint, bought during a trip to Rome years ago.

Ms Sebastiao removed some of the dust from the sculpture's face and carefully carried it to the surface of the washing machine, several feet from its former place, where they put the very few things they had been able to find.

"These are my little treasures," the 46-year-old said, and rested Saint Teresa alongside the three other slightly damaged statues.

She then grabbed her black gloves and went back to digging through the sand and debris, under a merciless Florida sun, looking for the rest of her collection.
This was the first time the couple, who had moved here in August, returned to this beachfront community that was virtually flattened by Hurricane Michael, one of the most powerful in US history, last week.

The third floor of their house was blown away by the category four storm that brought winds of 155mph (250 km/h) while a powerful wall of water presumably helped destroy its ground level, taking everything with it. Very little of what was still standing would likely be of any use.

"I heard on the news that it looked like somebody had dropped a bomb here. It's like [it was] a bunch of bombs," 60-year-old Mr Sebastiao said.

Before arriving, they had located their house in stunning aerial pictures of the destruction and had a sense of what was - and, perhaps as important, was not - waiting for them. Yet, they were shocked. "You see the damage but it's nothing like being here," he said. "It's much worse."
On Wednesday, residents began to see the damage by themselves of what has been described as "ground zero". Nobody could stay and there was very little sign that people would be moving back in anytime soon. (There was no electricity and water, and mobile phones were slowly working again thanks, in part, to a drone that provided signal.)

"It looks like a war zone," Bela Sebastiao said. They were one of the last ones to evacuate, they said, after officers went door to door in the hours before Michael strengthened, telling people to leave.

Most of their immediate neighbours did go but dozens of residents defied the orders and stayed, including those who had been through other hurricanes before. When it became clear that Mexico Beach would be directly hit, it was too late for some of them to leave.

Two deaths have been confirmed so far, of a woman and a man who lived separately, and whose bodies were found under the rubble - the couple did not personally know any of the victims. Across Michael's catastrophic path, at least 26 people were killed in four states, and dozens of others were said to be unaccounted for.
With each and every little discovery, Jaques and Bela Sebastiao shared surprise and sadness. A broken piece of a gift from a close friend that brought back good memories, or a fragmented object that belonged to one of their three grown-up sons, two of them who lived abroad.

"A lot of things I can replace," said Ms Sebastiao, fighting tears. The worst for her would be losing pictures of her father, who died in 2011. "Nobody else has these pictures, and they're gone."

The couple, at least, had found their home. Others had come back to nothing.
For those familiar with it, Mexico Beach had something unique. Many of its some 1,200 residents knew each other by name and the town’s small, old houses gave it a picturesque feeling. It is now all gone.

Most of the buildings next to the beach were completely swept away and it was almost impossible to determine where the streets started and ended. Numbers written on cardboard were put on trees and lamp posts that resisted the hurricane, and family’s names were sprayed on surviving walls.

Across the town, some residents had spray-painted signs saying "Loot it and I shoot". Looters, some of them armed, have been active in Bay County and officials said about 10 were arrested every night since the storm hit.

One family saw their home reduced to a pile of debris scattered over a different property three minutes away from its known address. Walking with them, a representative of an insurance company looked at his camera and said: "There's nothing to take a picture of."

While many of the houses were said to be insured, it was unclear if the payments would cover the costs of reconstruction following stricter - and more expensive - rules. Rebuilding the town itself will take a long time.
Shortly after arriving, the Sebastiao family raised a US flag in front of their neighbour's house, the wife of a former Air Force pilot who died years ago. He was once based in the nearby Tyndall Air Force Base, where hangars and other buildings were also heavily damaged by Michael.

She had asked them to search for objects belonging to her husband, "the only thing she was interested in," Mr Sebastiao said.

With her home almost completely destroyed, it would be no easy task. He had some hope, however, after finding his own years-old Christmas village almost intact.

"I feel like we're blessed. We still have a place, a lot of people don't," Ms Sebastiao said. "We still can go through stuff and find some stuff."
House after house, the objects being collected offered a small glimpse into these families' lives. Next to the Sebastiao home, a kitchen pan had been separated near the foundations that used to sustain a house.

"We're looking for anything," said 55-year-old Shelly Breedlove. "[The pan] is not a big deal for anybody else, but it's a big deal to me." Her teenage son had found a wooden structure, probably part of a door, where children's heights had been marked.

For 20-year-old Connie Huff, whose house was now a pile of debris three minutes away from its known address, there was not much to be rescued - some items from when she was cheerleader at high school, two medals and an old picture.

"I felt devastated," she said. "This place will and always will be beautiful to us and be dear to our heart."
Outside the ruins of their house, Jaques and Bela Sebastiao looked at what remained of the kitchen and joked about the cans of drinks and boxes of food that somehow stayed untouched on the top of the fridge.

"The saints," Mr Sebastiao jokingly said, looking at his wife, "protected the best stuff".

She laughed. "Only one payment done and Michael decided to pay us a visit."

"We'll rebuild it," he said, "but it won't be the same."