Navy pilot, FSU grad saves lives during flood

Troy Moon, PNJ  8:35 a.m. CDT May 18, 2014

Navy officer and pilot Jimmy Westbrook wanted to save lives. That's why he went to the Florida State University's College of Medicine campus in Pensacola. He graduated Saturday. But he already has a head-start on the business of saving lives.

When the big flood hit, Westbrook, a Navy lieutenant, left his Bristol Park home, his wife and two small children to wade outside to save his next-door neighbors — three women, one with cerebral palsy and in a wheelchair.

"He's a hero," said Clarissa Puryear, whose family was rescued from the flood by Westbrook, 35. "It was dire circumstances."

Puryear, the mother of the other two women in the house, cried as she recounted Westbrook's bravery.

"It was a loving act," she said. "He wasn't just a neighbor. He was more like my son. He came to our rescue, leaving his own family even though he was worried about them. He'll always be a hero."

On the night of the flood, as the waters rose and rose, creeping into the family home, Westbrook's wife, Ashley, called next door to see if the neighbors needed help. They did.

Westbrook waded through the floodwaters outside to Puryear's home, but the pressure from the water wouldn't allow him to open any doors. He broke a window and entered the home.

"The water kept rising."

Jimmy Westbrook pictured with his two daughters. (Photo: Ashley Westbrook/Special to the News Journal, Ashley Westbrook/Special to the News Journal)
"I put them on the counter," he said of the three women — Puryear and her two daughters, Venezia Jackson and Monique Jackson, ages 20 and 37. "Now, I had a problem of how to get them out of the house."

He couldn't open a door to get out of the women's home. So he grabbed a pot filled with macaroni and cheese from the stove and bashed in the door lock until the door opened.

Westbrook carried Monique, who uses a wheelchair, on his shoulders, then in his arms, out of the house while the other woman followed.

"There's a ditch between the houses," he said. "The water had been up to our breastbone, but when we hit the ditch, it was up to our necks. The two of us swallowed a lot of water."

The whole time, Westbrook was thinking about his own family, including two young daughters — Ellie is 3 and Zoey is 9 months.

"The whole time I'm helping out, I'm thinking 'I need to get back. What am I doing leaving my wife and two baby girls?' "

Soon, Westbrook, Puryear and the her daughters made it to Westbrook's home. His wife and daughters and family dog, were all on the counter tops trying to stay above the floodwater, which continued to rise. Then the power went out and the group was left in the dark with only a small flashlight to guide them.

"There's no power, the kids are crying and everyone is scared," Westbrook said. "I knew we had to get out of there."

Soon, two people came by in a small boat. Westbrook flagged them down and explained the situation. The people in the boat agreed to take Westbrook's wife and children and Puryear's daughters, to higher ground.

"I handed my 9-month-old daughter over to a perfect stranger," he said. Then he watched the boat move off to an area where emergency workers were already gathered. The workers gave the women blankets and had them sit next to heaters to dry off.

Still, Puryear and Westbrook were back at the house, trying to make their own way to higher ground. The two neighbors pulled themselves along the side of the houses, fighting the pull of the flood's current.

"It was slow going," he said. "The current was pretty strong. One of us would fall down, and the other would stop."

After a while, another boat took them to safety.

Puryear said there is little doubt what would have happened to her and her daughters if not for Westbrook.

"It was so frightening," she said. "We thought we were going to die."

Puryear and her daughters have been staying in a hotel since the flood. The Westbrooks are in San Diego. Westbrook was scheduled to report to the medical training program at Camp Pendleton, Calif., later this month. But the flood moved the family to California sooner. He was hoping to be in Tallahassee on Saturday for his graduation, but Mother Nature struck again.

"We live on Camp Pendleton and we can see three separate large fires from our house," he said. "I can't leave my family during this time, so I'm going to miss graduation."

Westbrook joined the Navy after graduating from the University of Washington. He came to Pensacola for Officer Candidate School, then flight school. He spent nine years flying helicopters for the Navy before earning a military scholarship to Florida State University. He returned to Pensacola two years ago as a third-year medical student.

The families had already been friends — Venezia Jackson is the Westbrook's baby sitter — but now they are something more.

"Oh, we're going to miss him," Puryear said. "We're going to miss the whole family. They'll always be in our hearts."