The Children of the Abacos

Devastated first by Hurricane Dorian, and then by a crippling pandemic, young children in Great Abaco Island and the northern Bahamas are still reeling from the fear and anxiety wrought by those experiences. A team of medical professionals from the University of Miami is trying to help.

After learning about hurricanes from the University team, the students donned gifted raincoats and tried their hands at being meteorologists.

At just 7 years old, Kaylen Brice can vividly recall jumping off the roof of his granny’s home during Hurricane Dorian to avoid drowning inside.

His classmate Makayla Lubin and her mother hid under a table in their home for hours as the massive, slow-moving Category 5 storm pounded the island. Many of their classmates lost parents or other relatives in the maelstrom. And many still struggle to talk about it.

These children are part of just one class of second grade students at the Central Abaco Primary School in Marsh Harbour. But their drawings recently served as a window into the harrowing experiences of these young children during Dorian, a 185 mile-per-hour storm that ripped through the northern Bahamas in September 2019 with high winds, rain and a 20-foot storm surge. The storm sheared away homes and businesses in
the bustling commercial center of the town.

Anjali Saxena, M.D., assistant professor of clinical internal medicine and pediatrics at the Miller School, with a student on Grand Abaco Island.

Close to 90 young Bahamian students were learning and drawing about hurricanes in late April as part of a pilot program led by a team of doctors and staff members from the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine’s Global Institute for Community Health and Development. The pilot was conceived by Anjali Saxena, M.D., an assistant professor of clinical internal medicine and pediatrics at the Miller School.

In the months after Dorian, she joined a team of University physicians from the Global Institute, and staff from a nonprofit called Direct Relief, that helped the Bahamian government care for patients at a public medical clinic on the island. At the time, Dr. Saxena was struck by the need for counseling and education to help local children process the trauma of living through such a destructive storm.

Kendra Van Kirk, M.D., listens as a student recounts his experience.

“As a general pediatrician, I left there feeling very concerned that there was this entire group of kids who were just sitting with these thoughts and nothing to do,” said Dr. Saxena, who is also academic program manager for the Global
Institute. “For months after the storm, they had no safe place to learn, play or receive appropriate counseling because of the immense infrastructural damage that had occurred. So, I really wanted to find a way to help them.”

Read the full story on News@TheU.

How You Can Help

To donate supplies for the team’s next trip to Great Abaco Island, please visit the Floating Library Initiative’s Amazon wish list. You can also contact the Global Institute at globalinstitute@med.miami.edu or donate here to the overall relief effort.

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