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Ike obliterated most homes, but spared one on Church Street

By MAGGIE GALESHOUSE
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[1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#)



Smiley N. Pool Houston Chronicle

A single house is left standing amidst the devastation left by Hurricane Ike in Gilchrist, Texas.

There's a new landmark in Gilchrist, one of the towns on [Bolivar Peninsula](#) that [Hurricane Ike](#) ravaged and left for dead.

The fire station is gone. The post office is gone. Every structure on the gulf side of this tight-knit community is gone.

Except for one house.

Standing tall, as if in defiance of Ike's windy, watery wrath, is the home of Pam and Warren Adams, who built the place in 2005 after [Hurricane Rita](#) destroyed their older home on the same lot.

On Friday, the first day many residents were allowed back on the peninsula, the couple returned to Church Street, ready to help neighbors whose homes no longer stood with theirs.

"I think I'm going through survivor's guilt," said Pam Adams, even though her home is uninhabitable, its main floor covered with mud brought in by the [storm surge](#). "But the fact that the house is standing, that it survived, is awesome. Gilchrist is still here. It's faith and hopefulness."

The Adams had already been back to see their house, so they knew what to expect. But for the people who live west of [Rollover Pass](#) — the residents and homeowners returning to the peninsula for the first time since the hurricane — it was surreal.

They saw brown grass and trees, casualties of the saltwater surge. Cars and golf carts sticking out of the sandy scrub at odd angles.

Stacy Ayers and Isabelle Ryan, who had a house on Crystal Beach, came back to a concrete slab.

"There aren't even any pilings," Ryan said. Both women were toting shovels and looking for random belongings that had been swept inland from their gulfside home.

Nearby on Crystal Beach, Jim and Karen Rush ventured back to the [vacation home](#) they built less than a year ago on Clara Street. The teal-colored house looked pretty good, despite some structural damage.

"Everything inside is salvageable," Jim Rush said. "We're just taking stuff out so it doesn't get moldy."

But Karen Rush's siblings and father weren't so lucky. Her sister's house across the street was gone. Her father's 800-square-foot home down the road was standing, but wrecked. And the home of her brother, Niel Svendsen, was rather tidily ripped in half.

Coming home to ruins

When the peninsula opened to residents at 6 a.m. Friday, the line of cars was eight miles deep, said Brian Hawthorne, a highway patrol

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sergeant. Everybody was to leave by 4 p.m.

"We anticipate people who still have standing houses will want to load up their possessions," said Hawthorne, "but you can't load a house in half a day."

Bolivar Peninsula will open at the same time today.

Back on Church Street, the Adams' comforted their neighbors, Cecil and Kay Mallet, whose home was leveled. The Mallet house sat three lots closer to the beach than the Adams' home, but was much older. Kay Mallet cried a little when she first saw the empty space, but then began to collect a few items that Ike left behind. A pot lid. A tile with a seashell on it.

"It's almost like there's nothing to remind you of your home," Mallet said. "It feels like you're in the wrong place."

The Adamses aren't sure why their home is still standing. But they've had plenty of questions about it since Chronicle photographer Smiley N. Pool's aerial photo showing their lone yellow house amid a sea of debris ran on the newspaper's front page and the national news media picked up the story.

There are other homes on Bolivar Peninsula still standing, some of them on the bay side of Gilchrist.

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But the aerial image of the Adams' home struck a chord with the masses.

Good structure, a little luck

Warren Adams insists that there is nothing special about the way the home was constructed. It was built to **Galveston County** code, he said, which anticipates 130-mile-per-hour winds on the seaward side of the county.

But the elevation may have helped. Adams said he built high, in part, to get a break on flood insurance. The home sits 15 feet above ground.

"The piece of land my house is sitting on was probably one of the highest above sea level in the area, about 8 or 9 feet above sea level before we even started the house," he said. "I think the house is about 16 inches higher than it needs to be."

The couple credits Aran & Franklin Engineering in **Galveston** with retrofitting their home to meet the county's building codes, and the builders who finished the home, AM Coastal Construction.

Warren Adams is worried that he and his neighbors won't be able to rebuild or recoup their losses.

"Our closest friends want to rebuild," he said. "A lot of people want to come back. Beach people love beach."

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