

Mattress Mack turns showrooms into shelters

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AUSTIN, Texas – As Hurricane Harvey approached Houston last year, thousands of people began gathering their emergency kits and mapping out evacuation routes. Not many Houstonians prepared the way Jim McIngvale did.

“We’d done a fairly decent job of preparing for this hurricane,” said McIngvale, owner of Gallery Furniture, who is better known in the area as “Mattress Mack.” “We had rented about 20 of these 24-foot trucks with 26-foot beds on them, very high off the ground, to get through a lot of water.”

What McIngvale hadn’t anticipated was that Harvey would drop so much rain that his drivers wouldn’t be able to get from their homes to the trucks at the stores. With plenty of trucks but no drivers, he got on Facebook and broadcasted live, telling Houston-area residents two of his stores were open as shelters.

He also put out a plea to anyone with a commercial driver’s license: Come to the store and we’ll pair you up with another person to go out in search of people who needed to be rescued.

“People came in by the droves,” McIngvale said. “We gave them the trucks, and they went out and rescued people on the overpasses in the driving rain, they rescued them in convenience stores where they had taken shelter from the rising water and they rescued them in neighborhoods when the Cajun Navy and other people brought them up to [the trucks] in boats.”



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Survivors loaded into the backs of the trucks 12 people at a time for a ride to one of McIngvale's retail locations.

"People came in, they had dirty water all over them, they had their life's belongings in black plastic trash bags," he said. "It was a very tough situation."

McIngvale made that situation a little easier. For three nights, he welcomed hundreds of people into two of his stores and provided food, water, mattresses and peace of mind. Altogether he estimated survivors got 2,000 nights of sleep in his two stores over three days.

McIngvale's employees patrolled the stores throughout the night in case there was trouble, but the survivors didn't cause any.

"People who had lost everything came in here, and even though they were traumatized, they had a great attitude, they were happy to be alive," McIngvale said. "They were safe and secure when they walked in here."

McIngvale's good deeds attracted widespread media attention, and all the reporters asked the same question: How could you let total strangers sleep on your fancy couches and mattresses?

"My answer," McIngvale said, "was, 'How could I not?' Winston Churchill once said, 'What type of people do they think we are?' We're Texans, and we take care of each other."



Hurricane Harvey was the worst of times for Southeast Texas, McIngvale said, but it also was the best of times, thanks to the resilience and helping spirit of the local residents and those who flocked from other states to lend a hand.

“For one brief moment in time, all of us came together,” he said. “All we worried about was people, and we took care of each other.”

To view a video on this topic, visit www.facebook.com/FEMAHarvey.

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