

HURRICANE MICHAEL

How to help storm victims for the holidays

Nada Hassanel
Tallahassee Democrat
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Two months ago, Michael destroyed homes and uprooted lives as it roared through the Big Bend and Panhandle.

Many families will spend Christmas and start the new year displaced by the storm or without loved ones they've lost to it.

According to officials, 43 people have died as a result of the Category 4 storm. As recovery efforts continue, that death toll could rise.

Many groups are spending holiday cheer to those impacted by the storm and invoking a spirit of giving to families struggling to move forward under difficult circumstances.

From toy drives to fundraisers to rebuild a free clinic, here are some ways you can help this holiday season.

Hurricane Relief Christmas Toy Run

When: Saturday starting at 8:30 a.m.
Where: Red Hills Powerports, 1150 Capital Circle Northeast, Tallahassee
Red Hills Powerports is teaming up with the Chipola Family Ministry for the Hurricane Relief Christmas Toy Run. Toys can be dropped off at Red Hills Powerports before the ride. Items also collected include relief supplies such as non-perishable food and baby items. More information visit [facebook.com/wever/238021801641392/](https://www.facebook.com/wever/238021801641392/)

Wakulla High School Toy Drive

When: Now until today
Where: Wakulla High, 2227 Coastal Highway, Crawfordville 32327
Wakulla High School is collecting toys to gift to children for Gulf County schools Port St. Joe Elementary School and Newishikha Elementary School. Toys must be dropped off at the front office or given to a teacher by Friday, Dec. 14.

Avicenna Free Clinic Fundraiser

When: Now until Sunday, Jan. 13, 2019
Where: Online
The Avicenna Free Clinic in Panama City has been destroyed by Hurricane Michael. The group has been providing services through a mobile clinic. Staff has started an online fundraiser for a new building. Since 2010, Avicenna has seen thousands of patients. Donate at [launchgood.com/project/hurricane_relief_for_avicenna_free_clinic/](https://www.launchgood.com/project/hurricane_relief_for_avicenna_free_clinic/)

GoFundMe for Beekeeper Relief

Where: Online
The Florida State Beekeepers Association, a nonprofit, has been receiving reports of storm damage. FSBAA started a GoFundMe to raise funds for the beekeepers. Donate at [gofundme.com/fbsa-beekeeper-hurricane-relief](https://www.gofundme.com/fbsa-beekeeper-hurricane-relief)
Additionally, GoFundMe created a list of Hurricane Michael relief funds at [gofundme.com/causal/hurricane-michael](https://www.gofundme.com/causal/hurricane-michael)

CSMS Pediatric Clinic toy drive

When: Today from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Where: CSMS Clinic, 4301 Third Avenue, Marianna 32446, or any Jackson Hospital CSMS clinic listed at [facebook.com/CaraballoPediatric](https://www.facebook.com/CaraballoPediatric)
Drop off toys, clothes and books to be gifted to children affected by Hurricane Michael. More information: [facebook.com/evenski/25629206824951/](https://www.facebook.com/evenski/25629206824951/)

Global Giving Hurricane Michael Relief Fund

Where: Online
GlobalGiving's relief fund supports its local nonprofit partners in their recovery efforts. Donate at [globalgiving.org/projects/hurricane-michael-relief-fund/](https://www.globalgiving.org/projects/hurricane-michael-relief-fund/)

Have a fundraiser or benefit event to help Reach Nade Hassanel at nhassanel@tallahassee.com or on Twitter @nhassanel



Rebuild 850 hosts a toy drive for children impacted by Hurricane Michael outside of the Tallahassee Democrat on Dec. 6. ALICIA DOWNE/DEMOCRAT



Jessamine Meis holds balloons given to her when she was surprised with the announcement that she is the Leon County Schools 2018-19 Teacher of the Year on Thursday morning. ASHLEY WATSON/DEMOCRAT

Leon High's Meis honored as Teacher of the Year

Ashley White
Tallahassee Democrat
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Leon High School teacher Jessamine Meis has worked with elementary school students as they learned the basics, middle school students as they established who they were and high schoolers as they prepared for adulthood.

Meis has accompanied some of those students on their journey from Apache Trace Magnet School of the Arts, Cobb Middle School and to Leon High School.

"Some of these kids, I've been teaching for eight years," she said. "The world history teacher, who has been with Leon County Schools for 36 years, was surprised Thursday morning in her classroom with the honor of being named the Leon County Schools 2018-19 Teacher of the Year."

Williams

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clined to testify on her own behalf. "In other words, it's a little bit of a gun-bite," she replied.

Williams' defense team presented just a handful of witnesses Thursday, including the lawyer who helped her secure a presumptive death certificate without a body, a fishing buddy and an old friend who Brian Winchester said he ran into at Walmart when he went to buy a shovel and tarp, as Mike's bloody body cooled in the back of his Suburban.

All three said Mike and Denise Williams appeared to be in a happy, loving relationship and there was no hint of trouble.

On cross-examination, the attorney, Curtis Hunter, did say it was exceedingly rare for a death certificate to be granted for a missing person, and Denise Williams did not inform him about one of the life insurance policies she collected.

Mike Phillips, whom Winchester knew since high school and said he ran into, said he had no recollection at all of that day. The Florida Department of Law Enforcement special agent said his memory of Mike Williams' disappearance begins the following day, a Sunday when he led a small group of young married couples to pray for his longtime friend.

A phone-tapped call

The day's most riveting testimony Thursday came from the prosecution's final witness, Kathy Thomas, a lifelong friend of Mike and Denise Williams and the first wife of Mike's confessed killer, Brian Winchester.

Her testimony bridged the past to the present and supported the state's case that Winchester, who helped Denise Williams secure \$1.75 million in insurance money and who he later married, killed at her behest and was complicit in keeping it a secret.

Thomas provided more details about a trip she took to Panama City Beach with Denise Williams and Winchester, who took sexually explicit photos of the two women together shown to jurors Wednesday.

The trip was to celebrate Denise Williams' 30th birthday and it occurred March 2000 — nine months before Mike Williams vanished. Both couples were supposed to go and planned to meet at the Winchester's house and drive together, but Denise showed up alone.

Thomas said she didn't want to go if Mike wasn't going, but they eventually convinced her.

"At that point in our lives whenever it was just me with Brian and Denise it

"I'm overwhelmed and excited and proud," she said beaming. "It's just a smorgasbord of emotions right now but mostly happy."

Meis' husband and two daughters played lucky to celebrate the big moment with her. Leon High Principal Billy Spring, School Board members Alva Striplin and Rosanne Wood, Superintendent Roddy Hazen and other principals and friends also joined in on the announcement.

"This is fantastic. She's obviously a very dedicated teacher," her husband John Meis said. "To be recognized by her peers in this way is spectacular."

Meis has been at Leon High for three years. Before that, she was at Cobb for a decade. At Leon, she also is a mentor teacher and sponsors activities such as the Black History Bowl and Longest Table.

One of her proudest moments while teaching was putting on a production

of Brundage, a children's opera, at Cobb. The last surviving Holocaust victim who had performed in the same opera in front of Adolf Hitler, flew down from New York City to speak with the students.

Overall, Meis must have working with students. She knew getting them excited about and being creative about the learning process. She does that by changing the curriculum as often as possible and finding ways to connect students with the material.

"It's more than just reading a book and gaining knowledge," she said. "It's finding ways to make it relevant and exciting and give them a reason that they want to learn as opposed to just telling them here this is what you have to learn."

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Kathy Thomas, ex-wife of Brian Winchester, wipes her eyes as she testifies in the trial of Denise Williams for the murder of her husband Mike Williams at the Leon County Courthouse Thursday. TOM SCHWARTZ/TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

Live coverage

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Thomas told Denise that later that same day, Marcus Winchester showed up at "The Copy Shop" where she worked. She said he told her "I had to take this to my grave."

"Marcus went on to tell me how my life would be ruined, how I'd never be able to start over," Thomas said.

She then confessed to Denise that not long before going missing Mike called her. He'd found a large amount of cash in Denise's purse and she'd lied about where it came from. He said he thought his wife had a boyfriend.

"I've always thought to myself, if I told Mike I think Brian has a girlfriend, I probably wondered if he'd still be here," Thomas said, crying. "Why didn't you guys just get a divorce? I've always known you and Brian loved each other."

Denise Williams did not react or answer the question, swiftly redirecting the conversation. At no time during the recorded phone call did she admit or deny being involved.

"They've been lying to me," Williams told Thomas regarding law enforcement. "They're playing everybody against each other."

Juries had questions for Thomas. They asked about Denise Williams and Winchester's divorce Dec. 30, 2000, the day Mike Williams went missing.

They also wanted to know whether Denise Williams seemed emotionally distraught that he was missing and whether Thomas had ever met a Angela, a woman Winchester had sex with when they were married.

Thomas said she didn't notice anything unusual about Winchester the day of the murder except that he did not side with her and their son to a family Christmas party in Cairn, Georgia. She didn't know at the time he was late to the party because he was burying the body of his best friend.

Thomas said she did not see Denise Williams that day, but told her over the phone she was looking for Mike.

"She did not seem distraught."