

GEORGIA & THE SOUTH

MORE TOP NEWS FROM AROUND ATLANTA, GEORGIA AND THE SOUTH

FLORIDA

Storm victims get financial relief

Sarasota-based program pays essential expenses for households hit by Hurricanes Helene, Milton

By **Gabriela Aoun Angueira**
Associated Press

Cecilia Grove didn't work for 38 days after Hurricane Helene's storm surge flooded the kitchen of the restaurant where she waits tables.

The Cottage, a local and tourist favorite on Siesta Key near Sarasota, Florida, might have reopened sooner, but Hurricane Milton made landfall on the key 13 days later.

The wait was excruciating for Grove. The 39-year-old single mother cares for her 7-year-old daughter, Aria, who is deaf and depends on cochlear implants, and her father, who lives with them. "I'm one person feeding three of us," she said.

After draining her savings to pay for car and health insurance, rent and food, Grove's options were to tap into a savings account she had set up for her daughter or start racking up credit card debt.

Instead, she got help from Season of Sharing, a Sarasota-based program that pays essential expenses for households in crises. Since Helene, the fund has spent over \$710,000 helping more than 400 families affected by the storms. It paid Grove's rent for November and December, letting her catch up on past bills.

"It made me cry," she said. "I couldn't believe they were willing and able to do that for me."

Residents of Florida's Gulf Coast endured two major hurricanes and a tropical storm in the span of nine weeks, and they are still feeling the economic fallout.

The disasters aren't just costly for those whose properties were damaged or destroyed. Replacing food that spoiled during power outages, evacuating to a hotel room, and missing weeks of work all strain budgets too.

"All of those things when put in relationship with how much



Cecilia Grove, with daughter Aria, got two months of rent from Season of Sharing for their home in Sarasota, Fla. STEVE NESIUS/AP

cash people have on hand are really serious challenges," said Sara McTarnaghan, a principal research associate at the Urban Institute.

Studies show those blows hit harder for low- and moderate-income households that may not

have savings to fall back on. Renters, the uninsured, and informal or undocumented workers will miss out on certain kinds of help.

The consequences of falling behind – debt, bad credit or even eviction – long outlast a

storm's immediate aftermath.

Programs like Season of Sharing can help fill the gaps or tie over households while they wait for assistance.

"Providing stability when a family is in chaos is so important," said Kirsten Russell, vice president of community impact at the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, which sponsors the program. "When households rebound, communities rebound."

The Community Foundation of Sarasota County and the Sarasota Herald-Tribune founded Season of Sharing 25 years ago. It helps people year round, but it temporarily loosened its application criteria and increased maximum payments in light of this unprecedented hurricane season.

The program is effective in crises because people already know and trust it, said Christina Russi, a fiscal agent for Season of Sharing for over a decade.

"It's never been glitzy. It's reliable, it's consistent, it shows up when it needs to be there, and you really can't ask for more."

Poppa Mike's on a mission: 'Anything to help these kids'

Produce stand owner collects donations to ease student lunch debt.

By **Ella Kroll**
Covering Poverty

Off the side of U.S. 129 on a sunny October day, Michael Meaders playfully tossed a Pink Lady apple to a young boy visiting his produce and peanut stand. It's a game he plays with all young visitors, who then get to take the apple home for free.

This day was made out of the ordinary for Meaders when the boy tossed the apple back to him – no child had ever done that before.

In White County, where he is fondly known as "Poppa Mike," Meaders' contributions to children are much more than an apple. From 2017 to July 2024, Meaders donated nearly \$16,000 to alleviate White County students' unpaid lunch debt.

Meaders' first donation, \$50 in cash from his pocket, was made after stopping by a local elementary school with a friend and asking the principal whether any kids needed their lunch paid for. After learning how much money was owed across the county's elementary schools, he began collecting donations in a jar at his produce stand. Now, nearly 10 years since his first donation, Meaders' efforts are going strong.

"There's no kid – if I know, if I can find out about it – that's going to be hungry," Meaders said.

White County, a rural area spanning 240 square miles with a population of just under 30,000, had a child poverty rate of 19.8% in 2023. Meaders, whose family has called the county home since 1823, has made it his mission to remedy the effects.

"(The kids) didn't ask to be brought in this world," Meaders said, with tears coming to his eyes. "I gotta take care of them."

Meaders said since garnering attention from outside the county, he has received calls from people living as far away as Montana and California who have been inter-



Michael Meaders, known as "Poppa Mike," donated nearly \$16,000 from 2017 to July 2024 to alleviate White County students' unpaid lunch debt. COURTESY OF ELLA KROLL



This story was produced by our news partners at Covering Poverty.

ested in donating.

"I enjoy being known, but it's not for my benefit," Meaders said. "I've been a giver all my life."

The county recently received a USDA Community Eligibility Provision that will cover all K-12 students' breakfasts, lunches and after-school snacks for the next four years. In lieu of paying off school lunch debt, Meaders' donations now cover things such as students' clothing, basic necessities, medical bills and more.

"He said, 'I'm not going to quit giving. I know there are needs,'" said Jill Baughman, director of state and federal programs for White County School System. "And he

was right, there are."

Baughman has known Meaders all her life, with her mother having gone through school with him and Baughman herself having gone through school with his youngest son. She considers Meaders a gift to the county.

"He always says, 'Anything, anything to help these kids,'" Baughman said. "He's just phenomenal and a treasure."

Meaders works at his stand Fridays through Sundays as long as the warm weather lasts. He begins preparing his peanuts – which he refers to as "Southern caviar" – on Wednesdays to ensure their freshness. He sources his produce from surrounding areas – "top-quality stuff" that isn't grown in greenhouses, he said.

When "Poppa Mike" is behind the stand, visitors can expect old-fashioned hospitality, a taste of "Southern caviar" and faith in a charitable cause.

"This is local, and this is love," Baughman said. "And that describes it best."

HOW TO HELP: Michael Meaders' produce and peanut stand is at 2213 U.S.-129, Cleveland, next to North Georgia Auto Finders. Donations are accepted via Venmo (@poppamikeskids) and in a donation jar at his stand.



Shannon Stillwell (left) and Deamonte Kendrick are the two remaining defendants in the lengthy "Young Slime Life" trial. AJC

'Young Slime Life' jury takes a holiday break in gang trial

Deliberations resume Monday on case against remaining defendants.

By **Shaddi Abusaid**
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Unable to reach a verdict after more than eight hours of deliberations, the Fulton County jury hearing the sprawling "Young Slime Life" gang and racketeering case was sent home Wednesday afternoon for the holiday weekend.

Two defendants remain in the longest trial in Georgia's history. Shannon Stillwell and Deamonte Kendrick are both charged with murder, and each faces life in prison if convicted of all the charges they face.

There were six defendants when the trial began in November of 2023, including Grammy-winning rapper Young Thug. Prosecutors said the rapper, whose real name is Jeffery Williams, was the co-founder and leader of YSL, which they argue is a violent street gang based in south Atlanta.

Williams and three others entered guilty pleas last month. The rap star was sentenced to 15 years of probation and banished from metro Atlanta for the

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next decade.

Attorneys for Kendrick and Stillwell have sought to poke holes in the state's case, introducing doubt wherever possible as they recapped the last 12 months of grueling testimony. They accused prosecutors of calling unreliable witnesses, some of whom admitted to lying to investigators years ago in order to protect themselves.

The prosecution's evidence consists largely of social media posts, rap lyrics and the testimony of law enforcement officers and one-time YSL associates. Some of those admitted associates seemed reluctant to testify against their old friends.

Jury selection in the trial began Jan. 4, 2023, and opening statements were given exactly one year ago Wednesday. Deliberations are expected to resume Monday morning.

KENTUCKY

Talking historical markers bring Black trailblazers to life

Muhammad Ali, war heroes, civil rights leaders highlighted.

By **Janet Patton**
Lexington Herald-Leader

Imagine strolling up to a historical marker, pulling out your phone and hearing from famous jockey Oliver Lewis or boxer Muhammad Ali.

You can do just that at a new experience that honors Kentucky

Black Trailblazers.

The 19 Kentuckians honored include Lewis, who won the first Kentucky Derby, and Ali, both in Louisville, and civil rights leader Whitney M. Young Jr. and the Harlem Hellfighters, both in Shelbyville.

Visitors scan QR codes on special markers at the tourism sites and an augmented reality experience launches on the phone screen and the Kentucky Black Trailblazer begins to talk.

The videos are fairly short, with

a little biographical information that may have been left out of the history books until now.

The video for members of the Harlem Hellfighters, buried in Shelby County, tells how they joined up to fight Germans during World War I and ended up fighting segregation too. Eventually, the all-Black regiment fought under French command and was one of the most decorated regiments of the war. "We even were the first ones to introduce jazz music to France," the offi-

cer in the video says.

ShelbyKY Tourism President & CEO Janette Marson spearheaded the project, which went live in July.

Using more than \$1 million in federal grants for tourism, the Kentucky counties and NIMBUS advertising agency, Louisville's largest Black-owned agency, which did much of the research for the project, were able to come up with "something transformational," Marson said.

She said they've been getting analytics regularly from Los Ange-

les-based Tactic Studio, which handled the tech side of the project, and "thousands of people have activated the experiences," Marson said.

The experiences are free. They were created by Tactic over two years for tourism officials in Shelby County, Louisville, Oldham County, Bardstown, Elizabethtown and Shepherdsville-Bullitt County and received federal ARPA grant funds distributed by the Kentucky Department of Tourism.